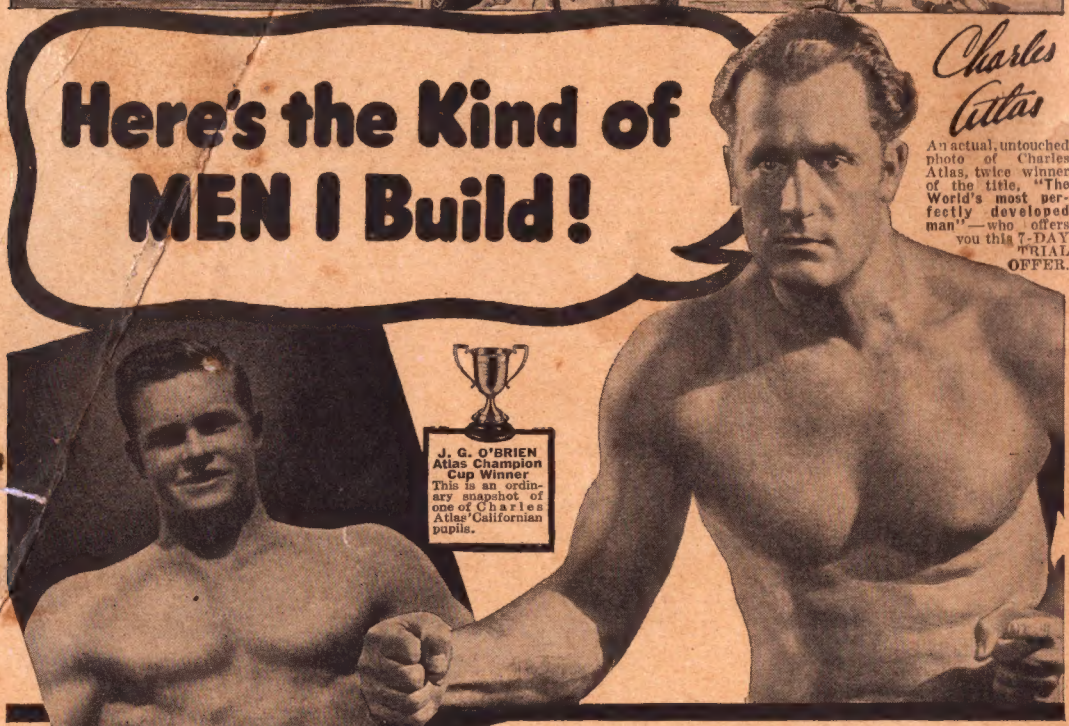
STREET & SMITH'S
WILD WEST
WEEKLY
10¢
SEPT. 9
1939
SEPT. 9, 1939
COLT HARVEST
complete novel by
C. William Harrison
also
SONNY TABOR
complete novelette

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME?
ABSOLUTELY NOT! THE ATLAS DYNAMIC TENSION SYSTEM MAKES MUSCLES GROW FAST!

Here's the Kind of MEN I Build!


Charles Atlas
An actual, untouched photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner of the title, "The World's most perfectly developed man"—who offers you this 7-DAY TRIAL OFFER.
J. G. O'BRIEN
Atlas Champion Cup Winner
This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' Californian pupils.

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

MEN—Meet J. G. O'Brien, of California, one of my Silver Cup Winners! Look at that strong neck—those broad, handsome, perfectly proportioned shoulders—that muscled chest and stomach. Read what he says: "Look at me NOW! **Dynamic Tension** WORKS! I'm proud of the **natural,** easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!"

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Then I discovered the secret that changed me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man," the title I won **twice** and have held **ever since,** against all comers. My secret is **Dynamic Tension.** It is a **natural** method. Its purpose is not only to give you the powerful, rippling muscles you'd like to see in your own mirror, but also—for those whose systems are sluggish for lack of proper exercise—to help them tone up their entire body, inside and out.

Do **you** want a better build? Are **you** dissatisfied with your present physical development? Then listen— All I ask is a 7-DAY TRIAL. Let me show to you—in even that short time—that I can give you the kind of body men respect and women admire!

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Just give me a week! Make me prove—in even that short time—that continuing with my **Dynamic Tension** method will make a **New Man** of you—give you bodily power and drive, and put you in magnificent physical condition which wins you the envy and respect of everyone.

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Let me show you the results produced for other men! I'll send you FREE my famous book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."** It shows actual photos. Write your name and address carefully on coupon. Mail to me personally **today.** I'll rush your free copy to you AT ONCE! Charles Atlas, Dept. 62J, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

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I want the proof that your system of **Dynamic Tension** will help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength" and full details about your 7-DAY Trial Offer.

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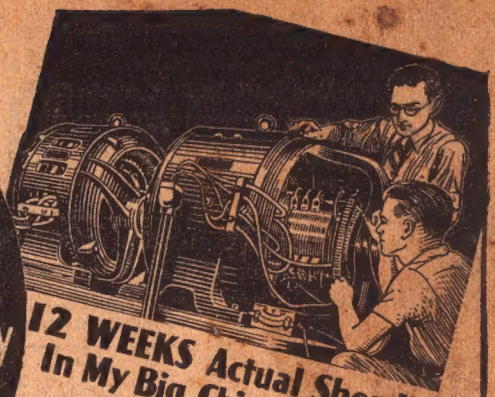

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STREET & SMITH'S

FOUNDED 1902

WILD WEST WEEKLY

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They were going to swing him for the murder of his brother, and with him the secret of the stolen gold!

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COVER BY RICHARD CASE

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A Chat with the Range Boss

EVERY time the bunch here on the home spread puts out an especially good number of Wild West Weekly we feel like celebrating. We're in the same position as ranchers or homesteaders with a good roundup or a good harvest. For it takes plenty of hard work and plenty of savvy to raise beef and grow crops. The same applies to corralling Western stories.

First you have to dab your loop on writers who know the West and what it stands for. Then you have to put your own brand on those writers and sow story ideas in their heads. When the time comes for roundup and harvest you don't always know even then just what you're going to get. If there are scrubs, you have to weed 'em out or send 'em back for fattening. If there's prime beef or prime crops you have to give 'em first place.

And we all feel that this week's feature novel, "Colt Harvest," comes in the prime class. C. William Harrison has the 3W brand on him. He's sent us fine stories for quite a while now, yarns that have brought praise from readers all over the country. He knows the West and the legends and stories of the West as well as any man going. "Colt Harvest" is a harvest of adventure, drama, suspense, and thrilling action.

And here's a letter from C. William Harrison that came recently. It shows how he keeps his eyes and his ears open when he hits the trail. A lot of you readers may be interested in what he has to say about that big cache of gun-hawk dinero down near the border.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: There's still a rumor floating around the Southwest that Zwing Hunt's buried treasure is just where Hunt's owlhooters buried it after they ambushed a band of Mexican smugglers in Skeleton Canyon. There is supposed to be a fortune buried there, thirty-nine bars of gold bullion, several gold statues, a cigar box full of diamonds, and some rawhide *aparejos* containing about ninety thousand Mex dollars. Maybe some vacationing readers would like a try at it. Here are the directions which Hunt is said to have mapped out for his uncle in San Antonio, just before he died:

Go to a rounded, bald, granite dome which is visible for miles from the New Mexico-Arizona plains, and then head west a mile and a half where you will come to a canyon, the west wall of which is sheer precipice and the east wall formed by wooded hills. A creek at the bottom of the canyon plunges over a ledge in a ten-foot cataract, and near

here along the west wall is Silver Spring in the shade of a tall juniper tree. At the foot of this tree is the stone-marked grave of one of the gang, and also five hundred dollars in gold, buried in a tin can.

Up canyon and south of Silver Spring exactly a mile and three tenths, is Gum Spring, and between these springs lie the scattered remains of a burned wagon, if they haven't rotted away by now. From Silver Spring to Gum Spring the west wall curves inward. At the deepest point of this concave stands a slender stone, resembling an obelisk, three feet high, square, and a foot thick, and marked on the east face with two crosses, one above the other.

Face the bald mountain at this stone and step twenty paces east. Now you will be at a point on a straight line north and south between Silver and Gum Springs, and the remains of a burned wagon is at hand. Also the buried treasure, for it is supposed to be buried directly underground. It is truly dead-man's gold, for none of the gang made up of Milt Hicks, Jack McKenzie, Zwing Hunt, Ike and Billy Clanton, ever lived to profit by it. Sincerely,

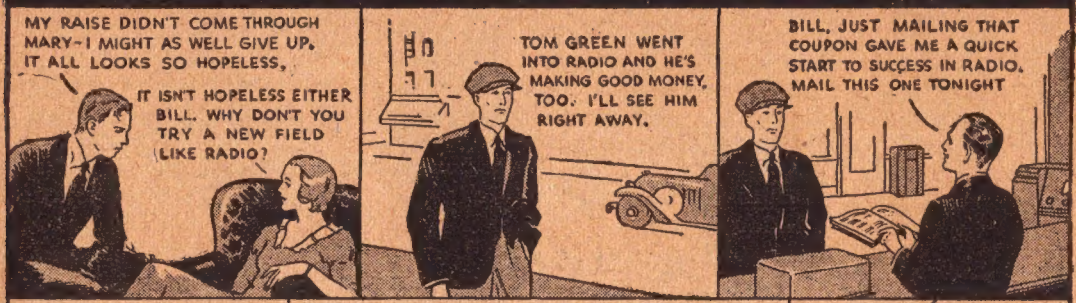
C. WILLIAM HARRISON.

Very few gun hawks ever did live to profit by gold they stole and murdered to get. That's as true right now as it was in the days of Zwing Hunt's gang. For easy money always has strings tied to it. Even if a man's conscience doesn't catch up with him, the law will. And the law in the West is swift and sure.

And now let's take a look at the trail ahead. Next week, too, there will be a big roundup of stories. "Murder Range," by William F. Bragg, a thrilling new six-part novel, begins. It's one of the fastest moving, most exciting Western yarns Bragg has ever laid on our desk, and he's written a lot for Wild West Weekly. In "Murder Range," a young puncher named Boots Egan comes back from Texas to avenge the death of his father. Trouble starts as soon as his feet hit the home spread, and he and his old friend, Post Hole Johnson, run into a range mystery that carries a double punch of action and suspense.

Along with this big feature story you'll find a complete novelette by Ed Earl Repp. "Guns of the Laughing Skull" it's called; but Ranger Halliday doesn't smile when that weird unknown laughter rings out in a lonely canyon. He doesn't smile, because the echoes of that laughter lead him straight into the biggest danger of his life. Bud Jones will fork his bronc again on the 3W spread in "Gun-Quick Silver," by J. Allan Dunn. Trapped, slashed by a maniac, Bud Jones faces the killer, El Joboli, and once again his Ranger courage is put to the acid test. There will be other short stories, features and departments, as well as another chat by yours truly, THE RANGE BOSS.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED-THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!


MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH MARY-I MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP. IT ALL LOOKS SO HOPELESS.
IT ISN'T HOPELESS EITHER BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY A NEW FIELD (LIKE RADIO?
TOM GREEN WENT INTO RADIO AND HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY, TOO. I'LL SEE HIM RIGHT AWAY.
BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT

TOM'S RIGHT - AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF GOOD PAY OPPORTUNITIES
U.S. MAIL
TRAINING FOR RADIO IS EASY AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST--
SOON I CAN GET A JOB SERVICING SETS -
OR INSTALLING LOUD SPEAKER SYSTEMS
OR IN A BROADCASTING STATION
THERE'S NO END TO THE GOOD JOBS FOR THE TRAINED RADIO MAN
YOU SURE KNOW RADIO - MY SET NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THAT'S $15 I'VE MADE THIS WEEK IN SPARE TIME
THANKS!

N.R.I. TRAINING CERTAINLY PAYS. OUR MONEY WORRIES ARE OVER AND WE'VE A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO.
OH BILL, IT'S WONDERFUL YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO.

I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *In Your Spare Time For A* GOOD RADIO JOB

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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CITY.....STATE.....

THE YELLOW HOARD

Prof. Archer S. Gray, famous explorer, presented each of his friends with curious little clay bricks—the receipt of which always led to murder.

Until—

The Avenger's friend received one—

Then the trail led to treasure—

Through a most baffling mystery.

It's a story of high adventure which introduces Nellie, as pretty as a Dresden doll, but as tough and clever with her hands as a top-notch wrestler or boxer.

THE AVENGER

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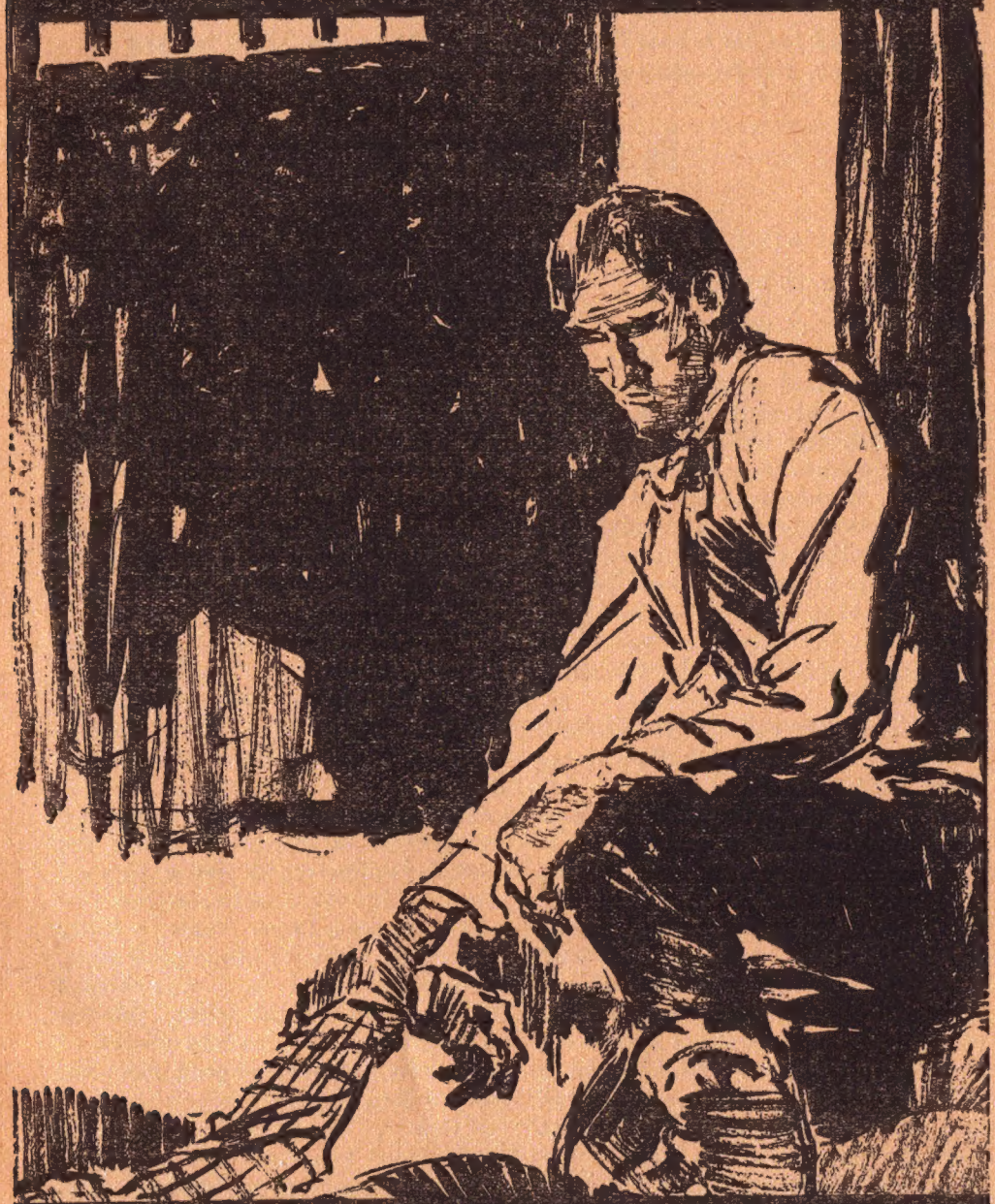
COLT HARVEST



By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

Author of "Valley Of Flaming Guns," etc.

COLT HARVEST

Damned for his brother's murder, a death rope snaking toward his neck, Bay Donahan alone knew the secret of the stolen gold.

By C. William Harrison

CHAPTER I.

JAIL BREAK.

DEATH struck swiftly that night. Darkness that was thick and murky smothered the adobe jail and the sprawling frame buildings that flanked Mesquite's single rutty street. Inside the jail, a dozen prisoners cursed and paced their six-by-twelve-foot cells, squinting through barred windows at the tiny patch of leaden-gray sky that was visible to them. It was hot inside, and it was silent—hot and silent with the threat of death.

In the corner cell of the jail, Bay Donahan turned nervously away from the small barred window. He was tall, leggy, with lean, flat hips wedging upward to wide, muscle-packed shoulders. The faint yellow shaft of light that slanted down the corridor from the jail office touched his face. His skin was smooth, bronzed by wind and sun, and a network of tiny lines webbed the corners of his smoke-blue eyes, hard now, and troubled. His lips were thin, compressed into a gray-edged line by the knotted muscles that rode the lean line of his jaw.

He halted his pacing at the iron-laced cell door, turned in his tracks, his eyes narrowing on the patch of sky that showed through the barred window.

It was after midnight, nearing the hour of one. At one o'clock, three killers would break jail. He knew that—he had helped to plan the break. But it was a trick that wouldn't work.

Instinct born and nourished by years on the bullet-studded trails warned Bay Donahan, clawed at his taut nerves. There had been too much whispering between the three killers in the next cell, and there had been other things even less tangible, yet singularly deadly.

"Hey, Keno!"

The low voice floated across the narrow cell to Bay Donahan's ears. He pulled slowly away from the window, face blank, lean muscles rippling into hardness over his lanky frame.

He recognized that thin, hacking voice even before he made out the runty, bandy-legged figure pressed close to the bars between the two cells. It was Pecos Neale, a killer by every sign of the profession. Neale's wrinkled face was bright in the faint light that sheeted into the cell, showing the glisten of sweat on his low, sloping forehead and sunken cheeks.

"Ready, Keno?" Neale's voice hacked out again.

Bay Donahan nodded jerkily. "Ready, Pecos," he said softly. "We'll bust out of this damn coop so quick that sheriff won't know what happened. Only no rough stuff, get that? We'd be rope bait

wherever we went if we turned law killers."

Pecos Neale laughed soundlessly. He turned and grunted something to the two men standing motionless in the deeper shadows behind him. Donahan went forward slowly, a hot tide of blood hammering through his veins. Pecos Neale's runty frame was tense where he stood just beyond the barred partition between the two cells, the shaft of yellow light full in his glittering, red-flecked eyes.

In the shadows near the cell door stood Bull Kroom, a giant of a man with bulging blue eyes and long, powerful arms swinging restlessly at his side. Kroom's bleak stare seemed to send white-hot flames jabbing at Bay Donahan's brain.

"You do yore job, Keno. We'll do ours." Kroom's voice was a low rumble, ugly.

At one side, the third killer chuckled gratingly. Hack Spooner was a lean rail of a man with a crooked beak of a nose and washed-out, colorless eyes. A livid scar ranged from his temple to the point of his narrow jaw, pulling his thin, bloodless lips into a perpetual, lop-sided grin.

"No trouble, Keno," Spooner droned softly. "Sounds funny, comin' from a killer like you. But don't worry. We got enough worries without croakin' that damn star man. Let's get started. It's one o'clock an' Spick ain't goin' to hole them hosses he's bringin' up more'n ten minutes."

Bay Donahan nodded, his lean young face shading with a tinge of gray. It wouldn't work! The warning clung to his brain like fire. But Roy Donahan had been stubborn. His brother had argued that this was the only way he could get the rest of the killer pack that had worked with Spooner and Kroom and Pecos Neale, and Roy was bent on cleaning up his county.

Donahan crossed the cell floor, pressed his face against the bars of the door. Down the corridor he could see his brother dozing in his chair, his legs propped up on the corner of his desk. Roy hadn't been sheriff long enough to dull the bright gleam of the star pinned on his vest, Donahan thought bitterly. He hesitated, lips flattening grimly, then called in a harsh voice:

"Water! Donahan, I'm sick. Gimme some water!"

The sheriff twisted around in his chair, slanted sleepy eyes down the double row of cells. He growled under his breath, let his boot heels plop down to the floor.

Bay Donahan clamped his hands around the bars, shook them savagely.

"Water!" he croaked. "I'm dyin', man! Gimme water."

The lawman shoved sleepily to his feet, picked up a water pail and dipper, headed down the corridor.

"All right, all right," he growled. "Yuh don't have to wake up the town to do yore dyin'. Save the county the expense of hangin' yuh, anyhow." He halted in front of Donahan's cell, pushed the dipper into the bucket, raised it brimful and held it out. "Here," he grumbled. "Drink this, then croak, yuh danged crook."

Donahan swayed back weakly on his heels, as if pain were contorting his insides. He had to make this look good; it was the way Roy wanted it. From the corner of his eyes he saw the three killers in the next cell tense, their eyes crawling into slits. This was Roy's plan, but it wouldn't work! The warning shrieked over Donahan's brain. But

he had to play it out. He bent over, clutching at his middle.

"Closer," he gasped. "Can't reach it, dammit. Hurry, man—"

The sheriff stepped up to the bars, slipped the dipper through. Then Donahan's hand shot out, wrapped around his brother's wrist. Sleep drained from Roy's eyes. He cursed, jerked savagely to free his arm, his other hand slapping down for his gun. Donahan lurched forward, shoved his left arm through the bars, cracked a balled fist down on the lawman's wrist. The gun spilled to the floor, skidded to a halt in the middle of the corridor. Hot blood churned wildly through Bay Donahan's veins. It was working so far. His brother was making the fight as real as they had planned. He'd swing Roy around now, grab the keys to the cell door, let himself out and get that gun. After that—

Then another movement caught his eyes. It was Bull Kroom's giant frame lurching up to the corner of the next cell, bulging eyes bright with murder lust, his big arms snaking through the bars toward the sheriff's neck. Donahan let go of his brother's arm, yelled hoarsely:

"Roy! Look out! That skunk, Kroom—"

The young sheriff's eyes shuttled around, startled by the ring of Bay's voice. Too late he saw Kroom's powerful arms clutching for him. He tried to duck under them, slipped off balance. Kroom's giant arms coiled around him, whipped him around savagely, locked him against the bars.

The chill of ice raced through Bay Donahan's lanky frame. He reached through the bars, tried to grab his brother's struggling body, but Kroom had swung him too far away. The giant killer's voice came in a rumble of hatred.

"Take 'im, Pecos. We don't want no trouble, like that polecat in the next cell says. Jest kill him easy-like."

Fear rode Bay Donahan's lean body like an icy wind. He saw Pecos Neale slide forward, a glinting metallic blade gripped in his bony hand. It was an ugly weapon, made of a spoon that had been battered flat, sharpened by hours of whetting on the concrete floor of the cell. Bay's face went white, deadly lights flaring in his smoke-blue eyes. His voice cracked out hoarsely:

"Damn you, Neale—"

The sheriff saw the blade stabbing toward his throat like a shaft of light! Horror glazed his eyes. He tried to twist to one side, but Kroom's arm around his body was a band of iron. A scream rose in his throat, lodged there, as the slashing blade found flesh. He groaned faintly, slumped limply against the bars. Pecos Neale stepped back, his wrinkled face twisted into a mocking grin.

"Shore, there wasn't no trouble, jest like we promised," he grated. "Too bad, but yore brother got himself killed, looks like. Yore skunky deal might 'a' worked only yuh made one little mistake."

Hatred that was like a white-hot flame blazed through Bay Donahan. Horror and dark hatred fogged his smoky eyes, and his voice throbbed with fury.

"You murdered him, Neale," he whipped out harshly. "You murdered him without givin' him a chance. It'll take the three of you skunks to square up that job, you three an' the polecats Roy was tryin' to get. No matter where yuh go, I'll find yuh, Neale."

Pecos Neale laughed soundlessly.

"That's yore second mistake, Donahan," he sneered. "Yuh'll have to come back from the grave to do all that. The first mistake was lettin' yore law-dog brother name yuh Keno Drant. Drant tried to cross a pard of mine up Silverado way. Drant's been dead two months, Donahan."

A red mist floated across Bay Donahan's eyes as he watched Hack Spooner jerk the cell keys out of the pocket of the lawman. The stringy outlaw lurched to his feet, fumbled one of the keys into the lock, kicked the door open. He scooped the sheriff's gun off the floor as he stepped out of the cell. He turned, his colorless eyes slanting toward Donahan. Donahan stiffened, his lean face going hard.

"Yuh'll never get away with it, Spooner," he bit out. "That shot'll raise the town. There's a posse out there waitin'—"

Hack Spooner laughed harshly. "They're waitin' at the edge of town for us to pick up them hosses Spick Danvers is goin' to leave there for us. That's mistake number three, yuh damn spy. Danvers left some hosses out there for that posse to watch, but he's bringin' in some others for us to ride. Didn't know that, did yuh? They're right behind the jail now. We'll grab 'em an' slope out of town while that posse sets out there wearin' out the seats of their pants. Shore, they'll hear this gun go off, but they'll figure it's yore brother's signal, an' they'll have to wait a long time for us to show up."

Murder lust flooded like a dark tide through Spooner's narrow face. Veins swelled, stood out like worms. His left hand flipped out, sent the jail keys skidding across the cell floor to the waddy's feet.

He chuckled tonelessly. "There's the keys, Donahan. Yuh'll need 'em where yuh're goin'. They'll open the door of Hades for yuh, an' this slug'll shove yuh through—plumb into perdition."

The gun whipped up in his hand, chopped down savagely. Bay Donahan rocked frantically away from the lance of flame that speared from the Colt. His leg struck the corner of the jail cot, jarred him off balance. He bounced around drunkenly. The side of his head struck the concrete wall. A red haze seemed to spill down over his eyes. He clutched wildly for the cell window, missed, fell heavily to the floor. Dimly, he heard Hack Spooner's snarling words.

"Like poppin' cans offn a fence! Hell, he didn't even know what hit him. Bull, you rustle up some guns. Pecos, get outside an' hold the hosses. Ain't no use riskin' our necks no longer around here. We got jobs to do."

Bay Donahan didn't entirely lose consciousness. He lay there quietly, struggling with battered senses. He heard the killers leave the jail, heard the slow *clop-clop* of their horses' hoofs as they rode off into the darkness. Then he stirred, blinking his eyes open. No slug had hit him but he didn't know how Spooner could have missed at that distance.

He rolled over on his back, then shoved weakly to his feet. The cell-door keys lay where they had fallen on the floor. He staggered to them, picked them up, weaved across to the door, opened it.

Then a slight sound came to his ears, a groan that came from the lawman—his brother—on the floor. He kicked through the doorway, dropped beside the sheriff. Blood was welling in thick spurts from the wound in his brother's throat, worm-

ing across the ugly blade that protruded from the collar of his shirt. He saw his brother's eyes flutter open. Roy Donahan grinned faintly.

"Thought he got yuh, didn't he?" came the dying man's choking words. "You said it wouldn't work, Bay. It didn't, but . . . I didn't take no chances, Bay. Took the lead out of . . . shells in my gun."

A hard lump rose and lodged in Bay Donahan's throat. His brother's pale face blurred before him, but he knew his eyes were dry. None of the hell that raged loose within him reached the bleak lines of his face.

"Don't talk, Roy. Rest, kid. I'll get the doc. Then—I ain't a lawman, but I'll trail down them dirty sons, finish yore job, an'—"

Roy Donahan's croaking voice broke in, hoarse with the rattle of coming death.

"Shore, yuh'll get 'em, Bay . . . shore, yuh will." His hand fluttered up to the front of his shirt, unpinned his star, lifted, then flopped down to where his brother's hand rested on his chest. "Wear it, Bay," he whispered. "Take over . . . for me. Reckon I won't . . . won't be . . . needin' my star . . . no more."

Bay Donahan got to his feet after his brother died. Knotted muscles rode the lean line of his jaw and his gray-shaded face held a harsh, bitter set. He stared bleakly down at the star cupped in his hand. Two of the corners were stained darkly with blood. His brother's blood! He started to wipe it off, then halted the motion. He raised the badge slowly, pinned it to the front of his faded blue shirt, his thinned lips moving bitterly.

"Shore, I'll wear it, Roy," he muttered softly. "I'll wear it till the skunks that put yore blood on it are cleaned out. I'll wear it, but you'll be with me every time I throw lead into that pack of murderers."

CHAPTER II.

TRAIL TO HADES.

THE express came winding along the upgrade like a long, black serpent, steaming and grinding through the rock-choked Pima Pass. It seemed to pause as it topped the last rise, then picked up speed rapidly, boring through its own smoke along the down grade toward the little border town, Tortilla, sprawling on the heat-soaked skirts of the Aquila Desert.

High above in the pale of the early-afternoon sky a buzzard wheeled in slow, lazy circles over the pass. Below, the train's whistle wailed as it rocketed down the twin ribbons of steel. Then suddenly the train lurched in full movement. The engine jerked, jumped, skewed sickeningly. The whistle screamed, almost the way men must have been screaming inside that plummeting mass of steel and wood. Cars piled into the derailed engine, splintering, skidding, driving. Rails twisted and writhed. Smoke billowed. Steam roared and mushroomed like a huge, misty bubble as the boiler burst.

Then hard-eyed men swarmed out of the rocks on either side of the wrecked train, men with Colts jutting from their hands and death in their eyes. They climbed over the wreckage, ignoring the groans of the bruised and battered passengers. The express guard, dazed and shaken by the shock of the crash, pulled open the door and stood there, blood sheeting down his face from an ugly, ragged gash over his temple.

The outlaws saw the guard as they scrambled toward the express car. They stopped instantly, curs-

ing harshly. Guns blared and throbbed. The guard flinched under the impact of smashing slugs, jerked upright, then slumped limply to the floor as the killers spilled into the car.

Bull Kroom, his bulging eyes flecked with murder lust, pulled up just outside the gaping door of the express car.

"Hurry it up!" he boomed. "We ain't got all day. Get that gold, then we're slopin'! Let the little stuff lay."

Pecos Neale, sweating under the strain of a bar of gold bullion, staggered up to the doorway, his eyes bright with greed.

"Three hundred thousand if there's a cent," he chortled, "besides a couple bags of cash. That mule'll sink up to his hocks in sand when we get him loaded with this gold."

Kroom's thick lips flattened in a flare of anger. "Leave them bags there," he rasped. "We ain't riskin' our necks any more to play hog. I don't like this set-up. Why should Jordan throw this job in our laps? He's plannin' to cross us shore. We ain't no good to him now that the law has spotted us. He's lettin' us do the dirty work, then he'll gun us down an' slope with the gold. But we're beatin' him to the jump, by hell."

Fear flickered in the eyes of a chunky, swarthy-faced hombre who had been packing the bullion on a mule. He turned, a shadow of gray creeping across his face.

"Bull, we can't cross Rope Jordan," he croaked. "He'll get us shore. Him an' the rest of the gang."

Kroom's puffy lips pulled up in a sneer, the glint of murder kindling in his bulging eyes.

"Gettin' yella, Spick? I sorta figured yuh was stringin' along with Jordan on this deal."

Spick Danvers' head shook jerkily. "I ain't, but dammit, Kroom, crossin' Rope Jordan—"

The gun in the hand of the giant outlaw thundered. Spick Danvers twisted around under the shock of lead, pain and horror glazing his beady eyes. He rocked on bowing legs, choked, coughed, then crumpled loosely to the ground. At one side a rangy, slope-shouldered individual whipped around at the sound of the shot. Rage flared over his wedgy face as he stared down at Danvers' twitching body, then his pale eyes fastened on the outlaw leader.

"Bull, that was murder," he rasped brokenly. "You killed my pard, an' by all hell—"

His hand slashed down toward the gun belted at his hip. Again Kroom's gun spurted flame and smoke, the blaring echoes of the shot rolling between the rocky walls of the pass. Dust puffed from the front of the tall man's shirt. He swayed drunkenly, cursed thickly, fought to lift his gun level. But the weight of the gun seemed to pull him down. He thudded heavily to the ground, lay still.

A short, harsh laugh ripped from Bull Kroom's lips. His guns snapped around on Pecos Neale and Hack Spooner.

"Two less to split with," he ground out. "Get movin', yuh galoots. I reckon yuh see this my way. We're buryin' this gold in Skull Canyon an' then leavin' the country for a spell. We'll split after things cool off. Now finish that packin'. I'm boss here, an' if either of yuh have got other ideas, yuh better keep 'em to yoreself."

High above, the lone buzzard wheeled downward in ever-narrow-

ing circles. Far to the north, the three killers moved across the heat-festered floor of the desert behind a plodding mule. Down below, battered and shaken, the train crew and passengers climbed out of the wreckage, stared bleakly at the bodies of the two outlaws, then began walking down the tracks toward Tortilla, a dozen miles away.

The buzzard lifted on a rising current of air, set its wings and slowly swung downward.

High up on the rock-studded slope of the pass, Bay Donahan pulled his grulla bronc to a tired halt. Trail dust grayed the grim lines of his face, powdered his faded blue shirt and worn jeans, and the badge, stained with the blood of his brother, gleamed dully under the rays of the brassy sun overhead.

He swayed forward in the saddle, stiffening slightly, as he saw the wreckage of the train below. Bunched jaw muscles seemed to tug the corners of his thinned lips into a bleak half smile.

He was too late. That horse-killing ride from Fandango had been for nothing. The bronc under him was heaving in exhaustion, nostrils distended, sucking in great gasps of the heat-soaked air. Its jaws were lathered, and sweat streaked the thick caking of dust that covered its shaggy flanks.

Too late. Donahan's long-fingered hands slipped down to brush the twin guns belted around his middle.

"We did the best we could, hoss," he muttered under his breath. "I figured their play would be somethin' like this when we trailed them skunks into Fandango an' found one of 'em had been pumpin' the rail agent. An' them telegraph wires bein' cut—"

His words trailed into grim, unspoken thoughts. He nudged his tired bronc down the rocky slope at a walk. He reached the rails, followed them until he came to the wreckage, then slid loosely from the saddle. A chuckle rose bleakly in his throat when he saw the bodies of the two killers.

"Fightin' among themselves already," he said softly. "Shore, they've started it already. It makes two less for me to hunt down."

Then a faint groan jarred against his keenly attuned ears. He spun, both hands jabbing down to holstered Colts. His flashing glance saw nothing that moved, but the low groan came to him again. He moved forward tensely, poised for the slightest warning of danger. He reached the express car, saw the guard huddled there in the doorway. The man was dying. Donahan knew that with his first darting glance. The man's eyes were glazed, unfocused, and the gray of ash was in his drawn face.

Donahan leaped forward, pulled the man out of the car and lowered him to the ground. He got his canteen from his saddlebag, spilled some of the water through the guard's pain-parched lips. The water seemed to kindle the last spark of life in the man. His eyes rolled, found Donahan's grim-set face, clung there.

"Thanks," he croaked hoarsely. "Thanks . . . I'm gettin' ready to . . . to cash, I reckon."

Pity melted the chill in Bay Donahan's pale eyes. "Easy, pard," he said softly. "I've been trailin' the skunks that done this job. If yuh can tell me which way they went I'll square up for yuh."

A hacking cough shook the dying man's body. His eyes flamed hot,

High up on the rock-studded slope of the pass Bay Donahan pulled his bronc to a tired halt.

feverish, rolling wildly as if to fasten this last vision clearly in his memory.

"North," he got out weakly. "I seen 'em head north." The red of blood flecked his lips, and the glaze crept back into his fading eyes. "Three hundred thousand in gold bullion . . . headin' north. They thought I was dead, but I wasn't. Goin' to Skull Canyon. It'll kill 'em, that gold . . . gun fodder, it is. Rope . . . Rope—"

Then his voice died into a whisper as the gates of death swung open for him. Bay Donahan straightened, his lean face bleak and hard. For a moment his stare clung to the body of the dead guard, then it raised, slanting off across the desert wastes toward Skull Canyon. He'd heard of the place, a canyon dotted with the bones of Mexican smugglers who had been ambushed by outlaw gangs.

Muscles knotted and rolled along the lean line of his jaw. He turned back to his horse, climbed stiffly into the saddle. Then he heard the distant ring of hoofs on the track rails. His eyes chilled, puckered grimly. It wouldn't be the killer pack returning. It was probably a posse. Law posses could be seen where one man couldn't, and he was playing out his brother's hand—alone. He swung his grulla off the track, pointed it into the barren, sun-tortured wastes of the desert. His fingers brushed the blood-stained badge on his shirt as he dipped into an arid, heat-choked draw.

"Another score to settle, Roy," he muttered softly. "This ain't yore county, but we're after the polecats you was aimin' to bust. We'll get 'em even if this trail leads plumb into Hades."

CHAPTER III.

GUN FODDER.

THE sun was a swollen brass ball hanging motionless over the naked Hachita Mountains to the west when Bay Donahan first saw the riders dogging his trail. At first it was only a faint fog of dust that caught his attention, then he made out the forms of the riders, dim and distorted by heat and distance.

He grinned crookedly, capped the canteen he had been sipping sparingly, and slipped out of the saddle to rest his horse.

They were following his trail; he didn't doubt that. But they hadn't seen him yet. If they had they would have cut straight across country instead of swinging around the butte, he reasoned. Another thought came on the heels of the first. He wasn't in his brother's county, and if the posse who had followed his trail from the train wreckage found that he wasn't even a lawman— He forced the thought out of his mind grimly. He would have to take his chances on the posse catching up with him.

He turned away from his horse, gathered chips of greasewood and made a quick fire behind an outcropping of lava rock. After a hasty meal he rubbed down his grulla, then strapped the saddle back on the shaggy bronc. He reached into the saddlebag, pulled out two burlap sacks, cut each of them in two, and bent to the horse's hoofs.

"There's more'n one way to lose a trail," he muttered grimly. "With yore shoes padded up, that posse will think yuh sprouted wings an' flew off when they get here."

He straightened after binding the last piece of burlap in place, kicked out the campfire, and climbed into the saddle. He didn't push his

horse, but held it at a steady pace toward the mountains that loomed faintly to the north against the darkening sky.

Hours dragged by, and the shadows of night closed in. The trail he had followed for two days was no longer discernible in the darkness, and he struck out directly for the first rise of the mountains. He knew Kroom and Spooner and Pecos Neale couldn't be many miles ahead of him.

Cat's-claw and spiked cholla scratched at his chapless legs as he pushed across the draws and arroyos that gouged into the desert floor. Cactus wrens chirped fretfully in nearby clumps of yucca, disturbed by the jogging trot of his horse. Near midnight a splintered moon began its climb through the stars that glittered like bright nail heads and ahead the mountains became a dark blot against the night sky.

For another hour he held that steady plodding pace, then he reined his bronc in and bedded down in a rock-choked gulch. At the first flush of dawn he was up, hunkering over the glowing coals of a small fire. He gulped down a tinful of coffee, then saddled his horse.

"We'll catch up with them skunks today, hoss," he murmured bleakly. "We'll start balancin' the books for Roy if that posse back of us—"

A sudden thought struck him like livid flame, jangling across drawn nerves, planing his lips into a thin, hard line.

"How could that be a law posse tailin' me?" he grated. "That express guard couldn't have lived more'n a few minutes, shot up like he was, an' shore not long enough for the train crew to get to town an' stir up the law."

The grim answer blazed across his brain, keening him with a foreboding of danger. It wasn't a law posse following him—it was an outlaw pack, riding either to join Kroom and his killers, or to rob them of the stolen gold.

Donahan swung into the saddle, smoky eyes fogged with deadly lights. No one had ever lived to identify the members of the Black Jack gang, and if Kroom and Spooner and Neale were members of the gang, as Roy had thought, they would no longer be of any value to the gang boss. The set-up was plain. The boss of the Black Jack gang had given Kroom and his pards the job of wrecking and robbing the train so that he could follow and pay them off with lead.

Donahan nudged his bronc into a faster pace, holding to the draws and gulches, as he neared the frowning walls of the canyon. He rode stiff and straight in the saddle, alert, taut, his senses straining for the slightest warning of danger. The canyon floor was clogged with mesquite and cholla, and some feet away he glimpsed the naked bed of a dried-up stream snaking out toward the open desert.

A canyon of death! Even yet, he had heard, the sun-bleached bones of murdered smugglers could be found strewn by buzzards and coyotes along the canyon floor. The air was heat-festered, stagnant between the looming gray walls. He slowed his mount, eyes narrow, restless. Any of the boulders that dotted the canyon floor, the thick growths of chico and mesquite might hide crouching killers. And he knew Kroom and his men couldn't be far ahead.

Then the silence was split by the roar of two quick shots. Donahan pulled up sharply, his lean face going bleak. The echoes of the shots rolled between the canyon walls like

the sullen rumble of thunder. A man's scream, not far distant, shrilled, then bubbled into silence.

Lips flattened over clenched teeth, Donahan nudged his bronc forward at a slow walk, both hands brushing thonged-down Colts. He pulled up a hundred yards farther on, as a faint movement through the mesquite ahead caught his nervous stare. He slipped from the saddle, paced forward tensely.

His heart thudded against the walls of his chest, hammering hot blood into his temples. He threaded his way through a growth of yucca cautiously. Those shots might mean anything, the warning signal of an outlaw on guard, another fight over the stolen gold.

Then the yucca growth thinned out to a cactus-studded stretch. He came to an outcropping of granite, rounded it slowly, then jerked to a halt.

There were men up ahead, not more than a dozen yards away. One of them lay huddled at the foot of a pitching horse. The other was on his feet, swaying weakly, his death-clouded eyes on the heavy-faced giant of a man who stood in front of him, holding a smoking gun.

Recognition flared in the depths of Bay Donahan's narrowed eyes. Pecos Neale was the man huddled on the ground. Hack Spooner was dying on his feet, his horrified eyes locked on Bull Kroom's broad face. Donahan heard Spooner's croaking voice.

"Yuh crossed me, boss. Yuh said if I plugged Pecos . . . damn yuh, Bull, I . . . I—"

He rocked off balance, fell heavily forward on his face, a widening blot of red matting his shirt beneath his shoulder blades.

Gun fodder! The dying express guard's words flamed over Bay Donahan's brain. That gold was gun fodder. A harsh laugh rose in his throat, died behind set lips. He stepped out from behind the rocks, eyes chill, bleak. He heard Kroom's grating laugh.

"Yuh tagged it right, Hack. Yuh crossed Pecos, an' I crossed you. One split for that gold now, an'—"

"It's yore ticket to hell, Kroom!" Donahan's words came like the crack of a whip, sharp, cold, deadly in their portent. "Turn around! I want to see yore face when I cut loose."

Bull Kroom's giant frame spun on whirling heels. He rocked forward on his toes, bulging eyes flaring with amazement and rage. Then the pallor of fear flooded his coarse features. Terror born of recognition blazed in his pale eyes. His voice came in a hoarse croak.

"Yuh! Yuh're dead! Hack killed yuh—"

Bay Donahan laughed tonelessly. "Not too dead to throw lead, Kroom. Yore time's up, killer."

A tremor shook Bull Kroom's giant frame. The killer sign! Donahan read it, felt hot blood churn through his veins. He saw Kroom's bulging eyes crawl into splinters of ice, saw the gun in the killer's hand swing up in slow, almost imperceptible movement.

"Ain't no sense of us smokin' each other up," he rattled harshly. "I didn't know Pecos had that knife. He killed yore brother, not me. Dammit, man—"

His big body exploded in savage action. A curse ripped from his puffy lips, and his gun flipped up in a flashing arc. Bay Donahan's guns seemed to bounce into his hands. Kroom's Colt blasted, but fear had hurried his shot. His slug snicked through the collar of Donahan's shirt, burning a white-hot fur-

row across his flesh. Donahan chopped his guns down deliberately, felt them jump in his hands.

Bull Kroom lurched to his toes under the impact of the heavy slugs. He swayed there, then spun around in a mad, lop-sided dance, crashing down over the body of Hack Spooner.

A thin, hard-lipped smile came to Donahan's wide mouth as he peered through the blue wisps of smoke that trailed upward from his guns. His left hand raised slowly to brush the bloodstained star gleaming on his shirt.

"We got 'em, Roy," he muttered softly. "The gold killed four of the skunks, but you an' me got Kroom. An' we'll get the rest of that gang jest like I said as soon as I get that gold back where it belongs."

He stepped forward, slipping his guns back into their holsters. He circled the three dead men, his eyes searching the ground. A few feet farther on he came to the body of a dead burro. He straightened, a warm glow creeping through his lanky body. The gold couldn't be far off now. He searched the broken ground narrowly ahead of him, then pulled his eyes to a halt on a sun-bleached skull half hidden in a tangled mass of cat's-claw and cholla.

A human skull grinned at him as he paced forward. His lips flattened, grayed at their edges. The empty eye sockets seemed to leer and mock him with the threat of danger. But it was something else that held his stare, a freshly cut, forked yucca stick that had been thrust through one of the eye sockets of the skull to form a crude arrow pointing straight ahead. He straightened, hot blood pounding through his veins. A few yards ahead he saw the fire-blackened skeleton of a wagon. Age had rotted the spokes of the wheels, and sun and wind had corroded the iron tires into brown, rust-eaten hoops.

At one side he saw a low mound of stones. He stepped forward, a crooked grin on his wide mouth and began pulling the rocks away. Blood throbbed dully at his temples as he saw the dull yellow glitter of the gold bullion buried beneath the rocks. Dead man's gold! The killers had murdered his brother in order to escape jail and steal that gold. And the gold had killed them all. Gun fodder. Maybe the men who had trailed him across the desert would unravel his trail, find him before he could get away with the gold. Maybe—

A sudden chill seemed to blanket the canyon. Donahan stiffened, still half bent over the mound, an inborn sense of danger jangling his drawn nerves. Then harsh-toned words jarred from behind him.

"That's it, mister. Jest freeze peacefullike. Ain't no sense stampedin' into yore grave!"

He straightened slowly, hands going clear of his guns, lean body hard, taut. He turned, saw the hard-case hombres fanned out just behind him, their eyes beady, bright through the holes in the black masks they wore.

Donahan's stare halted on a rangy, heavy-set man standing a short step in front of the rest of the gang, two Colts dangling in his blunt-fingered hands. One of the men stiffened as he saw the badge pinned on Donahan's shirt. Choking off a curse, he jabbed his gun forward.

"He's a law hound! I'm punchin' his ticket right now!"

The outlaw leader cut in harshly. "Shut up! I'm still roddin' this gang, an' don't forget it."

A cold finger traced the length of Bay Donahan's spine. He swayed forward, poising on the balls of his feet, hands hooking out just over the butts of his guns. He knew he couldn't beat their lead, but he knew he would try it when the time came. He chuckled softly, coldly.

"I figured it was a pack of polecats tailin' me instead of a law posse," he drawled. "You gents are the rest of the Black Jack gang, huh? Yuh let Kroom an' his pards do the dirty work so's you skunks could gun them an' steal the gold."

The outlaw leader's dark eyes screwed up behind his black mask. He laughed mirthlessly.

"Smart, ain't yuh, law dog? Figured that out all for yoreself? Yeah, yuh tagged it right, but yuh ain't got all of it. Yuh're Bay Donahan, right?"

Donahan nodded coldly. The outlaw leader sneered.

"I figured so. Maybe yuh don't know there's a lot of nasty talk about yuh since that jail break in Mesquite. Nobody ever saw yuh before yore brother farmed yuh in to spy on Kroom. When Kroom an' Spooner an' Neale slipped that posse waitin' at the edge of town, they figured somethin' was funny. An' when they couldn't find you they started some ugly talk. They've got an idea maybe yuh throwed in with Kroom. That's just the way I'm goin' to make it look. Get it?"

Donahan laughed harshly, bitterness galling him. "So they think I turned lobo, murdered my brother!"

The outlaw leader chuckled gratingly. "An' we're fixin' it so's they'll *know* it. Thought we didn't see yuh ahead of us the last two days, didn't yuh? We did, mister. We jest laid back to let yuh trade lead with Kroom while we got ready for the rest of the show."

Over the outlaw boss' shoulder, Donahan saw one of the gang slip on a heavy leather glove, then reach carefully down into a burlap bag and pull out a squirming, writhing rattler. Horror flooded into Donahan's eyes. He sensed the play, tried to jump back as the outlaw leader lurched toward him, but his muscles seemed numb, sluggish.

The killer's gun swung high, then lashed down in a vicious arc. Donahan rolled his head frantically to one side, but the clubbing gun barrel followed him, crashed down on his temple. Lights roared, splattered over his brain. The ground skewed under his feet, rushed up at him sickeningly. He struck hard earth, rolled over weakly, as the outlaw leader piled on him. Dimly he heard the killer's snarling voice.

"Make that snake bite him. It'll look like an accident this way. In the leg, dammit. Flip, start packin' the gold on the hosses. Lash, you fog it to town an' tell the sheriff yuh seen some lobos head in here. Joe Neese'll jump out of his pants to get a chance to bust up the Black Jack gang. Only he'll find the job's already done for him an' he'll figure the gold is hid where he'll never find it."

Bay Donahan fought savagely to hang onto his battered senses. He clawed himself upward through the clinging black mist that seemed to be trying to suck him deeper into its inky maw. And dimly through that black haze, he saw a man's gloved fist lowering a squirming rattlesnake toward his leg. He lashed out with a booted foot, saw blood spurt where his spurs raked across an outlaw's groping hands. A rasping curse snarled in his ears.

"Bust him again, Rope. That jigger is wuss'n a lobo steer. Star man,

huh! He can shove out plenty of his law where he's goin'!"

Again sunlight glinted from the muzzle of that clubbing Colt. This time the cloud of blackness swooped over Bay Donahan in sullen fury. Yet he could still see the curved fangs of the rattler as the gloved hand shoved the snake's head against his leg. He felt the needle-pointed teeth prick his flesh. They seemed to turn loose a torrent of liquid fire through his veins. After that there was nothing.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LITTLE GENT.

THE first thing Bay Donahan saw when consciousness returned to him was a pair of watery blue eyes peering down at him from under bushy, dust-grayed brows. Slowly it dawned on him that he was still alive. It amazed him at first, then cold bitterness gripped him as his memory flooded back.

He was alive, but this man bending over him must be the sheriff, Joe Neese, that the outlaw boss had mentioned. And with Kroom, Spooner, and Neale dead, it would be hard to prove he hadn't turned outlaw the way the Black Jack gang had framed it. It would appear that Kroom and the rest of the dead outlaws were all of the Black Jack gang, that Donahan had been the only one left alive after they had quarreled over the loot, and that he had been nearly killed by the bite of a rattler.

He tried to sit up, and the effort set trip hammers of pain drumming inside his head. He flopped back to the ground, cold beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead. His legs and arms were tied! Then he heard the man's creaky laugh and felt the ropes binding him cut away.

He rolled his eyes toward the man in numbed surprise. He could see clearer now. He searched the little gent for a sheriff's badge, saw none. Again he heard that creaky laugh.

"Reckon yuh'll take it a leetle easier now, younker. Yuh acted like a wild man when I fust got to yuh. Kicked an' yelled enough to raise the dead. Danged near busted my jaw once. Gettin' riled up like that is bad when yuh've been bit by a rattler, an' I had to tie yuh up."

Dumbly, Bay Donahan stared at the man. He was short, but there was strength in the breadth of his shoulders. His rough blue shirt was open at the neck, and his dirt-smudged jeans were tucked into the tops of a pair of scuffed boots. His face was leathery, hard set. He looked like a miner except for his hands. They were ungloved, slender, smooth. Gunman's hands, Bay Donahan thought, only the man wore no guns. His eyes were blue, frosty, cold. Donahan forced a puzzled grin.

"Yuh got to me before that snake poison done its work, huh?" His throat felt dry and parched. He saw the little gent's hard face crinkle into a slow grin.

"Yep, that's it, younker. Sam Hennis, that's me. I've doctored snake-bit gents for nigh onto thirty years, but I ain't never seen one as proddy as you. Kicked danged near as hard as Jenny mule over there. Only thing I ever seen like it was when a rattler bit me down in Sonora once. Only it wasn't me that done the kickin'. It was the snake, an' it plumb up an' died afore I could do anything for it."

Donahan grinned crookedly. A cold finger traced the length of his spine as he saw the little gent's frosty eyes narrow on him. He forced himself into a sitting posi-

tion, suddenly tense. Sam Hennis' lips drew into a tight, hard line, and when he spoke his voice had a grim, metallic edge to it.

"Owl-hooter, ain't yuh? Yuh're that Bay Donahan jasper that murdered his brother an' joined up with the Black Jack gang. I heard about yuh. Figured I'd hold yuh till they posted a reward on yuh, then collect. Danged sight easier way to make money than prospectin'."

Bay Donahan stiffened, his face going hard. "I'm Donahan," he drawled softly. "But I was after that gang, not in with 'em." His eyes dropped, saw that both of his guns were still in their holsters. Then he looked up and saw that Hennis had turned and was working at the pack on his flop-eared mule. Hennis was chuckling grimly.

"Yep, I'll be cashin' in on yuh, younker. Sheriff came jest after I rustled yuh out of the county. Brought yuh here till yuh got over that snake bite a little. I ain't splittin' no reward with a sheriff. Not Sam Hennis. But don't try to cut no rusty on me jest 'cause yore hands are free. Like I told that sheriff, I can handle any brother-murderin' skunk livin', an'—"

His voice broke off abruptly. He spun, pale eyes narrowed and bright. There was something swift, deadly, in his whirling movement, in the way his smooth, slender hands flashed upward toward the front of his coat. Then he relaxed slowly, grinned flatly.

"I didn't figure yuh'd try it," he said softly. "I gave yuh a chance to murder me, an' yuh didn't take it. Yuh ain't no killer, Donahan. I never missed yet figurin' a gent. Not Sam Hennis. Yuh're no killer."

Bay Donahan laughed bitterly. "A lot of folks seem to think I am. How'd you get a line on me so quick?"

Hennis' frosty eyes puckered slightly. "Sheriff in Copper City got a wire from Mesquite," he growled.

Donahan found himself leaning forward tensely, searching Sam Hennis narrowly. "You took a gamble on me, Hennis," he said slowly. "I could have plugged yore back a dozen times if I'd wanted to."

A faintly mocking glint crept into Hennis' frosty eyes. "Maybe not," he grunted. There was something deadly in the flat tone of his words that puzzled Bay Donahan. Hennis said he was a prospector, but his hands had flashed toward the front of his coat with the speed of a gunman. Hennis seemed to read his thoughts and laughed stiffly. "Besides, the way yuh was bellerin' about the Black Jack gang awhile ago didn't make me think yuh was in with 'em. Sheriff says the gang is wiped out now 'cept for yuh, an' he thinks yuh're one of 'em. Reckon yuh an' me know different though. I watched them polecats work on yuh from the top of the cliff, an' they was plumb alive when they rode out of the canyon."

Hennis' thin lips tightened. "Figure yuh'd like to meet up with that pack again, Donahan?" he asked softly.

Bay Donahan climbed weakly to his feet. His legs were shaky under him and his muscles seemed numb, powerless. He stared narrowly at Hennis, his hands slipping down to the worn butts of his guns. Sam Hennis chuckled tonelessly.

"Reckon yuh don't have to answer that question," he growled. "I sucked all the poison I could out of yore leg, but yuh'll have to rest up a spell. My niece runs a little cow

spread a few miles from here. We'll go there an' yuh can lay low till yuh get over that bite."

"What about the Black Jack gang?" Donahan asked coldly.

Hennis snorted grimly. "Yuh'll meet up with them danged soon, 'less I miss my guess. There's a new gold strike over near Copper City, an' I figure that gang'll hole up around there. Let's get goin'."

Donahan's lanky body went hard. He shoved his battered felt hat back and a cowlick of tawny hair tumbled down over his forehead.

"Yuh're a funny gent, Hennis," he said slowly. "Just how come yuh're so set on seein' that gang cleaned out? This ain't goin' to be no tea party."

Sam Hennis' lips drew into a thin, hard line. "I don't like tea parties," he ground out. "Now quit poppin' questions an' check yore guns. Yuh may need 'em before yuh think an' they won't work if they ain't loaded. Sam Hennis don't take no chances. I emptied yore guns afore I gave yuh that murder chance."

CHAPTER V.

CLUE FROM THE DEAD.

THE Star E ranch buildings sprawled at the mouth of a wide valley that gouged through the foothills of the mountains ranging off to the north. The sun was tipping behind the western horizon when Bay Donahan and Sam Hennis pulled their mounts to a halt.

Hennis slid to the ground, motioned the tall puncher to climb out of the saddle. Hennis had said nothing during that ride, but had held grim silence that had grated on Bay Donahan's nerves. Donahan couldn't figure the man out. The trappings on his mule marked Hennis for a prospector, but he couldn't forget the way Hennis' hands had flashed up to the front of his coat. The move had been smooth, flashing, deadly. But if Hennis was packing hide-out guns, Donahan could see no sign of them.

Hennis kicked through the gate, then halted, pulled something soft and sticky from the sole of his boot. "Damn pitch," he growled. "Pine ain't worth a hoot to make fences with. Sun boils out the pitch an' it's the devil to get off once yuh get it on yuh." He straightened, raised his voice in a yell: "Hey! Anybody home?"

A Chinaman appeared in the doorway, wiping his hands on a flour-smudged apron. He stared at Donahan, then flicked his almond-shaped eyes expressionlessly to Hennis. His face was a bland, wrinkled mask.

"Jus' Hop Lee home," he singsonged. He started to turn away.

Hennis growled an oath under his breath, stalked up the porch steps quickly, jerked the door open. Donahan followed, his eyes narrowed, puzzled. It didn't take much to see that the Chinaman didn't like Sam Hennis. And it went both ways. Anger throbbed in Hennis' harsh voice.

"Hop Lee, one of these days I'm goin' to bat yuh on the head an' drop yuh in a gopher hole. Yuh act civil or I'll start in now. Where's Nancy?"

The Chinaman's bland face didn't change, but his hand slipped out of sight under his apron.

"When Hop Lee's head gets bust, Sam Hennis will be glinnin' with his thloat," he singsonged calmly. He made a slicing motion across his throat with his left hand. "Jus' like that. Missee Eaden out lidin'.

Been out all day. Be back sometime, mebbe."

Rage smoldered in Sam Hennis' eyes as he watched the Chinaman turn and shuffle back toward the kitchen. He growled under his breath, turned, grinned thinly at Donahan.

"Hop Lee's disposition is worse'n my Jenny mule's," he grunted. "Nancy is out ridin', I guess. Probably still lookin' for the boot."

Bay Donahan's brows lumped in a slight frown. "Boot?"

Sam Hennis' laugh seemed forced, harsh. "Yeah, boot. Her dad used to be sheriff here. Got himself dry-gulched about a year ago an' when his body was found he only had one boot on. Nancy claims he had found out who the Black Jack gang was. Says he wrote their names on a piece of paper an' put it in his boot. Only he was killed before he got a chance to do anything an' Nancy's been lookin' for that missin' right boot ever since."

Donahan sat down, tired from the long ride. His head still throbbed with pain, but the sharpness of it had dulled slightly. He watched Hennis cross the room and stare out the door. Night was thickening outside. In the kitchen Hop Lee was shuffling around, chattering to himself in a low monotone. The voices of a couple of punchers sounded faintly from the direction of the bunkhouse. Minutes dragged by. Hennis turned from the doorway, scuffed a match into flame and touched it to a lamp. On a mantel across the room, Donahan saw a picture of a girl with a small, oval face, framed in a mass of dark hair that tumbled from under the edge of her wide-brimmed felt hat. Hennis followed his stare and growled:

"That's Nancy Eaden. The hare-brained young fool! She oughtn't to be chasin' around at this hour alone. No tellin' what might happen."

He broke off, listening intently. Donahan heard the sound, too, the low, rapidly mounting rumble of a horse's hoofs. He stood up and followed Hennis to the door. Outside, a starless darkness cloaked the range.

Faintly, through the murky gloom, he saw a long-coupled horse pound up and slide to a bunch-footed halt at the fence gate. A small figure slipped from the saddle, running toward the house. Her hat was gone, and her hair was wind-whipped, tangled. She was carrying something in her hand.

Donahan stepped to one side as she ran into the room. She didn't notice him, but whirled on Sam Hennis, her small face bright with excitement. She waved the object in her hand, a boot that was dust-covered, moldy.

"I found it!" she cried out. "Sam Hennis, I told you I'd find it. It's dad's boot. The one I told you about!"

Sam Hennis' pale eyes went hard. Grim little lines etched themselves into the corners of his mouth. He flashed Donahan a narrow glance, flicked his eyes back to the girl.

"Yuh found a boot all right," he growled. His voice was strained, grating. "It looks big enough to have been Jim's. Has it got the paper in it like yuh said?"

She nodded swiftly. "It's in there. But I didn't get a chance to look at it. I found the boot nearly a half mile from where dad was killed. It was wedged in between two rocks and hidden by some cholla that had grown up around it. Dad's horse dragged him after he was shot, remember? His foot must

have caught in the rocks, pulling the boot off."

Hennis' leathery face was a hard mask. "Yuh shore it's the right paper? Did yuh read it?" he cracked out. His hands were high up along the front of his coat, quivering slightly.

The girl shook her head. "Shut the door and pull the blinds. Somebody rode up just after I found the boot. He chased me, but—"

Then she saw Bay Donahan. Fear widened her eyes and she flashed Hennis a nervous glance. Hennis growled a curse.

"He's all right. Goin' to help clean out the Black Jack gang. Name's Bay Donahan. You say someone chased yuh?"

She nodded jerkily. Hennis cursed again. "Might be one of that Black Jack gang," he ground out. "Yore life won't be worth a plugged nickel now that yuh've got the dope on who they are. Gimme that boot!"

She backed away from him, turned to the lamp on the table. She started to reach a hand into the boot, then whirled as a man pounded into the room. The puncher was short, thickset, with a square, hard face and a shaggy mop of straw-colored hair. He halted just inside the door, eyes flicking from Donahan to Sam Hennis and then to the girl.

"What's up, Miss Nancy?" he whipped out. "Me an' Whitey figured somethin' was wrong, the way yuh rode up here. Yuh look like yuh seen—" He broke off, dark eyes staring at the boot in her hand. A slow change came over his square face; the tightening of lips, the bunching of taut jaw muscles, the narrowing of eyes that became alert, wary. His stare raised, slanted past the girl toward the shadowy hall leading toward the kitchen. "C'mon in, Whitey," he growled. "Reckon we got a little work cut out for us."

Donahan's eyes jerked around as the second puncher came into the room. Whitey was rangy, stoop-shouldered, a hard-mouthed oldster with a weather-beaten face and faded blue eyes. His hair was the white of snow.

"Reckon we figured you-all would be needin' us, Miss Nancy," Whitey drawled coolly. His eyes on Bay Donahan were impersonal, cold.

The girl started to say something, but Sam Hennis shouldered past her, his face a leathery mask.

"Whitey, kick that door shut an' lock it!" His voice was harsh, grating. He spun to the chunky man, who had moved over near the girl, a bleak, faintly sardonic grin on his lips. Hennis choked off an oath. "Bowley, this ain't no time to play hero. Yore job is to watch the windows. If that gent trailin' Nan was one of the Black Jack gang—"

Outside, a heavy-bore gun roared. The front window splintered, showering shattered glass across the room. Donahan twisted around, both hands clawing out his guns. Sam Hennis cursed vibrantly, then dropped to one knee. He yelled throatily:

"Nan, get to blazes away from that lamp. Yuh want to get—"

The rifle blasted again. This time the lamp near the girl exploded into nothing. Everything went black. Bowley, the chunky puncher at the side window, raked the glass out with the barrel of his gun, leaned out, his Colt blaring. Whitey rammed the bar into its sockets, then leaped to the front window, his gnarled hand holding a jutting six-gun. Donahan couldn't see Hennis in the thick darkness, and the outlines of the two punchers

were only faintly visible against the rectangles of the windows.

Then the killer's gun roared again. Lead whanged off the front window sill, thudded into the wall across the room. The night itself seemed to split to the throbbing of crashing Colts that instant. Donahan thought he heard the dull splat of lead striking flesh. A low groan followed, and he went cold all over with swift fear. He twisted around, lurched forward through the darkness, both hands widespread. He felt his right arm strike the girl and carry her to the floor with him. She screamed shortly, her tiny feet lashing out. Donahan growled harshly:

"Cut it. I'm just makin' shore none of them slugs drop you. That killer's out after whoever he can get."

Nancy Eaden's voice cried out shrilly: "The boot! Somebody jerked the boot out of my hand!"

Bay Donahan's blood flamed hot in his veins. He twisted around, rolling to his feet, narrowed eyes probing the thick darkness of the room. The killer's gun outside the house had silenced. That might mean anything—that the gunman had sloped, or that he had slipped into the room with them somehow.

No sound broke the death-freighted silence of the room. Bay Donahan crouched there in the darkness, hands on his guns, lips flat and hard. Then a smothered oath that came on a man's pent-up breath reached his ears.

"You say someone got that boot?" It was Sam Hennis' voice, bleak, strained.

The girl spoke up swiftly, the ring of fear in her voice. "It was jerked out of my hand! I felt the man's fingers as he grabbed it. *He's in here with us!*"

The silence that fell then was stifling. Donahan leaned forward, both guns jutting out in his hands, the acrid scent of burned powder in his nostrils. He knew in that nerve-shattering silence that gunpowder would burn again at the least hostile sound. He drew breath into his lungs, spoke up slowly, tensely:

"I'm here by the girl, Hennis. Where are you?"

Hennis' strained voice answered softly: "Here by the door. Nobody got through this way."

Donahan's hands tightened around the butts of his guns. "Bowley! Whitey!"

Only stagnant silence answered him. Hennis uttered a strangled oath. "Somethin's happened to Bowley an' Whitey. Dammit, I'm findin' out what!"

A match scraped into flame across the room, and the faint glow of it fell on Sam Hennis' hard face. Donahan pressed forward as Hennis turned to the front window a few feet away. He reached Hennis' side as the little gent bent over a body huddled at the foot of a shattered window. His gray-edged lips moved to utter a single word.

"Dead?"

Sam Hennis twisted around, looked up, pale eyes fathomless in the flickering flame of his match. His voice was harsh, flat-toned.

"Shore, he's dead. A slug hit him plumb center."

Donahan felt a slight figure move up behind him. It was the girl, her breathing choked, sobbing.

"Whitey—dead!"

Donahan caught her arm, turned her away. "You better stay here," he said gently.

The flame of the match Sam Hennis held fluttered and went out. Hennis scuffed another match into flame and moved off toward the side

window with Donahan following him closely.

Bowley's raking gun barrel had smashed the glass out of the window, but the chunky puncher was nowhere to be seen. Sam Hennis glanced at Donahan significantly and growled bleakly.

"That's where the boot went. I never did trust that guy. He's in with that gang shore's shootin'."

Bay Donahan pushed his head and shoulders through the open window. The faint light from the stars glittering overhead pierced the thick darkness, outlining the body huddled just below the window. He pulled a match out of his pocket, thumbed it into flame, let it fall to the ground. The dim light of the falling match gave a fleeting view of the chunky puncher. It showed a widening dark blot under Bowley's outstretched left hand. Donahan didn't have to look closer to know that Bowley was dead. He straightened, pulled back into the room, lips flat and thin.

"Maybe yuh're right," he drawled softly. "But if Bowley was in the gang, he's out of it now. He's dead."

Hennis' eyelids crawled down over expressionless eyes, as he stared at Bay Donahan. He still gripped his Colt, a long-barreled, well-oiled weapon Donahan guessed had been worn in a hide-out holster. Hennis' knuckles were white around the butt of the gun, and his tight-set lips were bracketed with tiny lines that had etched themselves into his leathery skin. Hennis' voice came in a slow, scratchy drawl.

"Shore, he'd be dead. When he grabbed that boot from Nancy he tipped it off that he was in the Black Jack outfit. An' that gang don't let anyone live long enough to spill who they are. He's dead 'cause the jasper who took the boot Bowley passed him killed him."

Donahan's eyes pulled away from Hennis' hard face as a yellow flame broke through the shadows of the room, waving thin tendrils of light across the walls. He saw Nancy Eaden bending over the table, touching a match to a candle. Her face was still pale, but her small chin was firm and her dark eyes determined. Donahan moved toward the girl, his eyes searching the floor. She caught his searching stare, laughed bitterly.

"It's not here, if it's the boot you're looking for. You threw me to the floor. Maybe you know something about that boot."

Donahan's jaw tightened. "I was tryin' to keep yuh from gettin' tangled up with a slug," he snapped, an edge to his voice.

Her eyes wavered under his direct stare, and she nipped at her lower lip. "I . . . I'm sorry," she breathed. "Only the way that boot was jerked out of my hand— Your name didn't mean anything to me at first. But now I remember what I heard about you, and—"

Donahan laughed harshly. "An' you think anybody who'd help murder his brother could do anything," he whipped out. "Only it happens I'm tryin' to finish the job my brother started. I didn't steal that boot, miss, an' you can think anything yuh want about it."

The sound of the bar being lifted from across the door pulled him around. Sam Hennis stood there, his stocky frame faint in the shadows. Donahan cracked out flatly:

"Hennis, where you goin'?"

Sam Hennis pulled open the door, turned, his face rock-hard. "Skunk huntin'," he ground out. "Yuh can stay here an' talk all yuh want. Me, I'm goin' to work."

He shoved through the door, slammed it after him. Donahan hesitated, lean muscles ridging over his lanky frame. He heard the low rattle of hoofs fade into the silence of the night, then turned quickly to the girl, his lips edged with bands of white.

"Yuh may have a lot of ugly ideas about me, but yuh can keep 'em to yoreself for a while. I've got some questions to ask, an' I want the answers quick. Hennis said yuh're his niece, an' you called him Sam Hennis 'stead of uncle. Why?"

The girl's eyes dropped under his blunt stare, and for the first time she seemed to see the bloodstained star pinned on his shirt. She started, jerked her eyes up to his face again, a gray pallor crossing her cheeks.

"Was that—your brother's?"

He nodded bleakly, saw a new light kindle in her dark eyes.

"Then if you'd wear that you couldn't be what they say," she said quickly. "I never called Sam Hennis uncle because—well, I never liked him much. I don't know why, but—" She pressed forward, gripped his arm in clutching hands. "He's all I have left, Bay. You've got to stop him. He's no gunman and he won't have a chance if he finds that gang. He's been prospecting in the Hachitas for three weeks, and—"

Donahan broke in sharply: "Over there? That's the opposite direction from Copper City, ain't it?"

She nodded quickly, startled by the ring of his voice.

Donahan went on bluntly: "Yuh got any idea where he's headin'?"

She nodded again, jerkily. "Probably for Jack Jordan's place north of Copper City. Dad always said he thought part of Jordan's men were the Black Jack gang, but he didn't live to prove it. You'll go after Sam, try to stop him?"

Chilly lights fogged the depths of Bay Donahan's narrowed eyes. "Shore," he growled. "I'd like to meet up with Jordan's crowd myself. But what gets me is how that boot got out of here so quick. I'd swear no one could have busted in here an' out again without—"

His voice trailed off as ugly thoughts flared across his mind. He grinned at the girl, then crossed the room and went out the door. He slowed his pace as he went down the porch steps, halted at the foot of them and struck a match.

Dust lay thick on the ground before him. He bent low, eyes searching the scuffed-up dust. He saw several boot marks before he saw what he had expected to see. It was in a clear space where the tracks of only one man's boots showed in the dust. When he straightened, his eyes were like chips of ice, bleak, deadly.

"I'll be damned!" he muttered softly.

Like Sam Hennis had said, the murderer had slipped into the house and out again, taking with him the missing boot. Bay Donahan loosened the guns in his holsters, turned grimly toward his horse. Men had been killed for a lot less than the thoughts racing across his mind.

CHAPTER VI.

RED NIGHT.

GOLD had made the town. They called it Epitaph, and there was evidence this night that it would live up to its name. A boom town with rough, unpainted shacks that had been thrown together in the fevered frenzy of the new gold strike; tents that had been set up

in wild disorder at the mouth of the arid gulch.

Bay Donahan, his narrowed eyes shifting around him alertly, threaded his bronc along the rutty lane that bored through the jumble of tents and shacks. A piece of a packing box tacked to an upright post labeled the lane as Nugget Street, and it led toward one building farther down the gulch, a huge, sprawling frame building bearing the dimly visible letters: "Saloon, Jack Jordan, Prop.," printed across its false front.

All during that ride from the Star E Ranch, Bay Donahan had seen no sign of Sam Hennis, but now as he reined in at the hitch rack in front of the saloon, he saw Hennis' mare tied in farther down the rail. The animal was badly winded, streaked with sweat and trail dust.

Donahan dismounted slowly, nerves drawn, senses keened for the slightest sign of danger. Inside the saloon, a tin-pan piano was banging loudly. A tenor wailed a range tune, but his voice was only half heard over the clump of heavy boots and the shrill laughter of the dance girls.

At the saloon doors, Donahan paused, glanced around, then slipped quickly into the room, slid swiftly to one side, placing the wall at his back. He stood there, lanky body taut, poised for instant action. It was a motley crowd that met his eyes inside that smoke-fogged room.

Dance girls filtered through the mob, prying drinks out of bleary-eyed miners, laughing at the course humor aimed at them. A roulette wheel whirled in one corner of the room, balls clicking as they fell into their place. Whiskey glasses clinked at the long, pine-slab bar. Poker chips rattled at the card tables.

Yet, in spite of the untamed clamor that filled the place, a sense of danger pervaded the smoky atmosphere. Donahan's shifting stare halted on a knot of roughly dressed men talking in an ominous undertone in the far corner of the room. As he watched, they turned, shouldered grimly through the crowd toward a thickset, black-garbed man at the end of the long bar. A chill traced the length of Donahan's spine. Trouble! The inborn sense of danger jangled over taut nerves. His hands drifted down to the cedar butts of his guns, poised there.

Silence that was freighted with the threat of death smothered the room when the miners halted in front of the big man behind the bar. They hesitated an instant, then one of them spoke up harshly.

"Jordan, we want a powwow with you. It's about this gold rush yuh started here. There's something all-fired funny about it. Yuh farmed in a bunch of tenderfeet, charged 'em ten thousand apiece for a hole in the ground, an' they start cleanin' up. The rest of us old-timers moved in an' we've worked days without seein' any sign of color."

A gangling, stoop-shouldered man with work-gnarled hands and a sun-reddened face, snorted meaningly.

"There never was any color here. Me, I prospected this gulch ten or twelve years ago an' I didn't find nothin' but horned toads an' lizards."

The man they had called Jordan looked up coldly, then dropped his eyes to the bar again. Wordlessly, he shoved stacks of silver dollars into a heavy cloth sack, moved a pair of gold scales from the bar in front of him, then faced the miners squarely. Even from his distance, Bay Donahan could see the yellow flecks that brightened Jordan's muddy eyes. Jordan's hands dropped out of sight behind the bar,

hanging close to his side. For an instant he hesitated, then his voice lashed out like the crack of a whip.

"Don't get proddy with me 'cause yuh ain't hit it rich," he flared. "The claims I had staked were all sold out when you got here. Don't blame me for that."

One of the miners, a big, raw-boned man with a heavily bearded face, laughed harshly.

"That ain't keepin' us from thinkin' there's something funny about this business. Yuh've cleaned up big runnin' this saloon since the rush started an' chargin' us sky-high prices for grub. The only ones that've hit pay dirt are them ten or twelve tenderfeet yuh sold them claims to, an' all we know is what they've told us. We ain't seen their dust. You gave 'em orders not to show it around. We been figurin' maybe this gold rush was made to yore order, an'—"

Flaring rage darkened Jordan's face. "Yuh been thinkin' that, huh?" he grated. His muddy eyes darted around the room to several hard-case hombres edging forward. His head jerked in an almost imperceptible nod. "I'm thinkin' yuh gents have wore out yore welcome around here. I own this land, and I'm sayin' get out, or yuh'll start diggin' for gold from the bottom up."

Back in the room a man smothered a nervous curse. Boots scuffed as men hurriedly shoved away from the bar and poker tables to clog the saloon doors. Donahan's eyes flashed around the emptying room, saw no sign of Sam Hennis, pulled his stare back to the bar again, when a miner's voice boomed.

"We don't scare that easy, Jordan. We staked our claims on open land, an' we're stayin'. We're stickin' around until we see some of that gold yore pilgrims got. Try to run us out an' yuh've got a fight on yore hands."

The faint glint of lamplight on gun metal caught Bay Donahan's alert eyes. He shifted forward, unhurried, yet quick in his long strides across the floor. Half hidden by several hard-case hombres pressed around him, a bony, slope-shouldered jasper was drawing a Colt.

Even as Donahan slid in close to the skinny gent, he heard the click of the gun hammer being dogged back. He nudged the man's shoulder with a stiff finger, drawled icily:

"Boothill's full of gents who've tried murder, polecat."

The bony man's head jerked around. Pale, colorless eyes locked with the bleak stare of Bay Donahan. Then his face drained white and an inarticulate curse gurgled in his throat.

"Hell," he choked. "*You!*"

Donahan grinned mirthlessly. "Yeah," he whispered. "Me. Yore rattler poison didn't work like the stuff in my guns will. I thought you skunks would give yoreselves away when yuh saw me."

The killer's gun wavered, then tipped down, slid back into its holster. From the corners of his eyes, Donahan saw the miners staring grimly at Jack Jordan. Jordan seemed to be waiting for something that didn't come. Then his eyes shifted nervously. He bit out a curse, said harshly:

"All right, yuh'll see that gold if that's what yuh're yelpin' about. My men'll round up them tenderfeet an' have 'em here at midnight. You be here then an' yuh'll see all the color yuh want."

Cautiously, Bay Donahan backed away toward the door. Halfway across the room he heard the bony

man rasp a curse, spinning in savage action.

"Boss, that Donahan skunk—"

The snarling words blazed across the room. Cursing, yelling men spun on whirling heels. Donahan's guns leaped out of their holsters, snapped level with blurred speed. The bony killer's gun whipped around, spurted flame and smoke.

Lead whacked through the brim of Donahan's hat. He ducked, faded swiftly to one side, his guns yammering. The bony gent folded up as if a battering-ram had slammed into his middle. He was dead when he hit the floor.

At once the entire room was fogged with swirling clouds of gun smoke. Pencils of flame lanced through the blue haze. Lead splintered slivers from the floor on all sides of Donahan's swiftly moving body, whined through the air like invisible swarms of bees. A man screamed, crumpled to the floor, clutching at blood seeping from the front of his shirt. Jordan's rage-thickened voice roared out above the echoes of crashing guns.

"Get that jigger! Earn yore pay, trigger men!"

No man, even moving as rapidly as was Bay Donahan, could live long in that hail of lead. He changed his direction away from the door to a heavy table that had been overturned in the rush of the miners toward the door. He reached it, hunkered down low, his guns pitching and throbbing in his hands. His eyes darted around him wildly. He could never reach that door and live to get through it. And he couldn't stay where he was. But there was a window behind him. They might not expect him to try that way.

He ducked low behind the heavy table, tilted his guns up. He triggered a fast shot, saw one of the hanging lamps black out. His other Colt jumped, roared in his hand. The remaining lamp, its hang cord cut through by the slug, cometed down to the floor and crashed, spilling liquid flame over the rough boards. Then swift darkness closed in. A man cursed hoarsely. Jack Jordan's bull voice belled out:

"Watch the door! He'll make a break for the door."

Donahan spun away from the table, lurched erect, headed for the dimly outlined window at a crouching run. His legs snapped him upward in a headlong dive and at the same time he doubled both arms over his face. Glass splintered as he struck the window, slashing his clothes, raking his skin a dozen places. Then he hit the porch floor outside as a sheet of lead roared through the gaping window.

He rolled swiftly to his feet, wild thoughts racing over his brain. Before him were the tents and ramshackle houses that would offer no hiding place, and beyond that the open range. Once he'd mounted his bronc and tried to make a run for it, every one of Jack Jordan's killers would be on his trail. The thought vanished from his mind as quickly as it had come. But another flared in its place.

His eyes darted to the low porch roof. He pouched his guns, leaped upward, caught the eave of the roof, bowed his lanky frame, swung up and backward, stretching himself flat on the roof. The next instant cursing, snarling killers spilled through the saloon doors. Almost below him they halted, milling excitedly. One of them cursed gratingly.

"He's gone! Dammit, boss, he ain't had time—"

Another cut in hoarsely: "His hoss is still there. I remember that

bronc. But how the devil he lived through that snake bite—"

Jack Jordan's throaty curse broke the excited babble short. "Shut up! I told yuh to keep still about that rattler business. Get movin' and hunt that jigger down. Gun him an' make shore of the job this time. The law wants him, don't it? We'll be in the clear for the killin'. One of yuh stay here with me. We got to get things ready. Midnight ain't an hour off, an' we gotta work fast."

Footsteps thudded on the porch floor as the killer pack began fanning out to search the town. Below Bay Donahan a man's words sounded like the grate of steel on stone.

"By hell, Rope, pullin' a ringer on them pilgrims was easy, but foolin' them miners is somethin' else. We better hunt up the boss. He's around here somewhere. Once them miners see what them pilgrims got—"

Then the man's voice faded out of hearing, and Donahan heard the two killers move back into the saloon.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BLACK JACK GANG STRIKES.

FOR a full five minutes after the gun pack had disappeared among the tents and shacks of the town, Bay Donahan didn't move from where he lay stretched out on the porch roof. A hard, mirthless grin was on his thinned lips and his eyes held the chill of death. His left hand drifted up to the bloodstained badge pinned on his shirt, and his lips moved to utter grim words.

"We're finishin' yore job, Roy. Jordan's men are the Black Jack gang. Two of 'em called Jordan 'Rope,' an' that's the name the dyin' express guard was tryin' to say. It's the name I heard when them skunks jumped me in Skull Canyon."

But Rope Jordan wasn't the real boss of the outlaw gang. Donahan knew now what he had only suspected before, and the knowledge ridged lean muscles along his jaw.

He shoved cautiously to his knees, began crawling silently up the porch roof toward a window that opened on the second floor of the saloon. The window wasn't locked. He inched it up and slipped into the murky room.

A cot covered with rumpled blankets ranged along one wall and at the other side of the room he made out the dim outline of a table and a couple chairs. He padded across the floor, opened a door cautiously, and peered out on a narrow balcony that rimmed the saloon's main room.

Down below, through the faint blue haze of smoke, he saw Rope Jordan and a bandy-legged runt of a man huddled in front of a small safe. Jordan's low voice floated up to his ears.

"Get goin', Monte. You know what to do if yuh see the boss."

Monte, the runty man, pushed around the end of the counter and disappeared through the front door. Donahan slipped out on the narrow balcony, hugging the shadows of the wall. Outside, he could hear the clump of heavy boots coming toward the saloon. Silently, he reloaded each of his guns, then settled back to wait. He saw Jordan hurriedly pick up two bulging canvas bags, disappear toward the rear of the building, then return to the main room as the miners stalked through the bat-wing doors. Jordan stared at them, a thin smile on his lips. Donahan heard Jordan's cold voice.

"That jigger we tried to kill is

Bay Donahan, the gent that killed his brother in Mesquite an' helped his pards bust jail. He's one of the Black Jack gang, so yuh better keep yore eyes peeled."

One of the miners spoke up grimly. "We'll fuss with the Black Jack gang when the time comes," he growled. "Right now we're interested in seein' that gold yore pilgrims got. It's near midnight, Jordan."

Jordan's smile faded from his lips and his muddy eyes screwed down slightly. "Yuh'll see the gold all right. They've been wantin' to put it in my safe, but the gold they got is their worry. With Donahan here scoutin' the layout for his gang, I got enough worries of my own. Here come the pilgrims now."

Donahan's stare pulled around toward several men pressing into the room. They halted nervously just inside the door, their faces sunreddened, strained, eyes nervous. Their store clothes were frayed and worn, showing splotches of dirt and mud. Jordan moved around the bar toward them, grinning easily.

"Reckon yuh don't mind comin' here," he drawled. "These old coots have been spillin' a lot of nasty talk about me. They think yuh men didn't find no gold on the claims I sold yuh, an' I figured yuh'd prove it. Yuh all brought it, didn't yuh?"

Donahan saw the men nod jerkily. One of them spoke up hesitantly:

"We brought the gold, Jordan, but we was coming here anyway. It's about our claims. We paid you ten thousand apiece for our claims and you guaranteed us a profit on them. None of us knew raw gold from lava rock till you showed us. Our claims paid off good for three or four days, an' then the gold began petering out. Ain't none of us seen color for two days now."

Donahan leaned forward, suddenly tense. He saw Jordan's lips tighten, go gray at their edges. The gambler's muddy eyes shifted nervously. One of the old-timers laughed harshly.

"Yuh wouldn't turn to saltin' mines, would yuh, Jordan? Yuh wouldn't sell these pilgrims a hole full of pyrite, would yuh, an' let 'em think it was gold?"

Jordan spun, a dark tide of blood flooding his face. His hands hung loosely at his side, brushing gun butts that jutted from under his black coat. Rage thickened the words that burst from his taut lips.

"If any of you gents had the nerve to pack a gun I'd make yuh eat them words," he ground out.

Up on the balcony, Bay Donahan's mind raced. He knew Jordan was stalling for time, but he didn't know the reason. Donahan's eyes swept the room below him again, and for the first time saw Sam Hennis. Hennis stood near the door, back to the wall, eyes narrowed, watchful. Donahan chuckled softly. Hennis said he wanted to clean out the Black Jack gang. Maybe he would get his chance soon.

Then a hollow-cheeked tenderfoot spoke up nervously: "Jordan, I sold everything I had to get the price of that claim you sold me. I don't know anything about pyrite or salted claims, but if I've been robbed—"

Jordan broke in gratingly: "You gave that gold the acid test yoreselves, didn't yuh? Don't let these galoots stampede yuh. They won't believe yuh struck it rich until yuh show 'em." His eyes flicked to the clock on the wall over the bar. "Let 'em see that gold, gents," he

drawled, his voice suddenly cold, deliberate. "We'll settle this fuss right now."

Bay Donahan shifted forward to the balcony rail, guns swinging out in his hands. Whatever was going to happen would come now. The deep-set conviction tightened his nerves. He saw the pilgrims hesitate, then heard one of them speak up falteringly: "Maybe we are going off half-cocked. We can find out soon enough."

In a body, they moved to the bar, pulling heavy pokes from under their shirts and coats.

"We'll spill it on the bar," one of them began.

A sudden shot roared out. From the corner of his eyes, Donahan saw half a dozen masked gunmen spill into the room, guns fisted, eyes fired with greed. The Black Jack gang! Blood flamed hot in Bay Donahan's veins. His guns swiveled, thumbs rocking back the hammers.

The pilgrims whirled, fear striking their faces. One of the outlaws lurched forward, eyes cold, deadly through the slits of his mask.

"Reach high an' freeze, gents," he cracked out. "This is pay day an' we've come tuh collect. Make a crooked move any of yuh and it'll send yuh to Hades on a shutter. Jordan, pull that gun an' yuh'll never live tuh use it."

Two of the outlaws pressed forward, prodding the pilgrims back to the bar. Another ducked behind the bar, bent to Jordan's open safe. A cold half smile froze on Bay Donahan's lips. It was only a cover-up play, pretending to rob Jordan. It would give Jordan a chance to say that he had been threatened, robbed, if it came to a showdown.

One of the outlaws began moving down the line of pilgrims, dumping their pokes of gold into a saddlebag he carried. Near the end of the line, one of the tenderfeet jerked back, his voice bitter, shaky.

"You can't take this. I got a wife an' kids back home, an' if I lose this gold—"

A rasping laugh ripped from the lips of one of the killers. His gun muzzle snapped around like a black whip. It jumped, roared. The pilgrim made a futile effort to leap away from that flaming gun, but the slug hammered into his body in full motion. The shock of the lead smashed the man sideways off balance. He struck the floor in a bouncing roll that lodged his body against the bar in a limp heap. The gold poke he had died to save lay just beyond his outstretched fingers, a tiny yellow stream trickling from a burst seam.

Donahan leaned out over the balcony rail, his face hard. His twin Colts tilted down, their dogged-back hammers held under tense thumbs. His voice ripped out like the lash of a whip:

"Up here, damn yuh! You got a new pay boss, skunks!"

The eyes of the killer pack jerked up, flaring with fear and hatred and murder lust. One of them cursed harshly, paled below the line of his black mask.

"*Donahan!*"

One of them snarled hoarsely, flipped his gun up in a flashing arc. His yell was vibrant, throbbing with hatred: "This time, damn yuh—"

The rest of his words were blotted out by the blare of his Colt. Smoke, pierced by a jabbing finger of flame, billowed from the muzzle of his gun. Splinters exploded from the rail in front of Bay Donahan. The slug smacked off the hard wood,

screamed past Donahan's face. He swayed to one side, drifted back a step, both guns pitching and roaring in his hands. One of the killers lurched around under the bite of lead. He crashed heavily to the floor, fought himself up to his knees and began crawling toward the door.

That instant there was nothing but flaming guns and cursing men. Below Bay Donahan, the room was fogged with smoky haze that was split by blaring tongues of gunfire. Lead shrieked its death song all around Donahan, plucking at his clothes, burning his flesh in a dozen places. Through billowing black smoke, he saw the outlaws falter. One of them snatched the dead pilgrim's gold poke up from the floor, then heeled around, dived for the door as the rest of the gang broke.

Then another thing caught Donahan's eyes, a faint movement behind the end of the long bar where Jordan crouched. He got a fleeting glimpse of Rope Jordan's hate-contorted face squinting down the sights of a Colt. The gun jumped even as he tried to throw himself wildly to one side. It seemed that an invisible fist had crashed along his temple, sending a blaze of pain across his brain. A convulsive shot boomed from his right gun, but he knew the slug had found only the ceiling. Then both guns slipped numbly from his fingers, spilled to the floor. He swayed on his feet, wagging his head, trying to break through the swirling gray fog that enveloped him. He felt himself rock forward over the balcony rail toward the floor below. He fought to catch himself, but his muscles had gone dead. Then a warm, red curtain dropped over his eyes. The last thing he knew was that he was falling.

CHAPTER VIII.

SALTED MINES.

IT dawned upon Bay Donahan gradually as he returned to consciousness that rough hands were knotting a rope around his neck, and that the sullen rumble that sounded hollowly in his ears came from the lips of a lynch pack. He lay quietly, fighting to gather the tangled threads of his memory. It came back to him slowly, the fight with the Black Jack gang who were robbing the pilgrims of their gold and faking the robbing of Rope Jordan to clear themselves of suspicion. Memory of Jordan's shot returned to him, and with it a consciousness of the pain that hammered at his temples and the dull throb of bruised and battered muscles. Then a thin-edged voice shrilled in his ears, jarring all thoughts of pain out of his mind.

"String him up! He murdered his brother, didn't he? He's in the Black Jack gang, ain't he? He don't deserve no chance."

Bay Donahan forced his eyes open, trying to focus them on the blurry faces that stared down at him. He wagged his head slightly to clear his vision, felt the raw hemp of the hang noose bite into his flesh. Again that thin voice lashed out.

"He's come to. We'll swing him high an' wide, the murderin' devil!"

Donahan's eyes screwed up as he fought to draw strength into his battered muscles. He shoved to his feet, half dragged upward by the rough hands that gripped his clothes. The floor rocked under him and he braced himself with widespread legs, lips flat and hard.

The end of the hang rope, already looped over a rafter, hung within a foot of his face. One of the pilgrims, his face bright with bitterness and

deadly intent, reached for the rope. Donahan's balled fist clubbed out, crashed against the man's jaw, sending him spinning away from the rope. A sullen roar lifted from the crowd. Hard-eyed, grim-jawed men lurched forward, smothering his pain-weakened blows, locking his arms to his side. One of the miners, a grizzled, bearded man, grabbed the end of the rope, pulled out the slack.

"I'll take this job," he yelled. "It won't be the first time I've helped hand out rope law to this skunk's kind."

Then another voice rang out. It came from one of the tenderfeet, a skinny, hollow-chested man with drawn cheeks and tired, red-rimmed eyes.

"Wait a minute! He robbed me the same as he robbed the rest of you, but give him an even break. Give him a chance to talk for himself."

One of the old-timers laughed harshly. "Talk for himself!" he snorted. "He murdered his own brother, didn't he? He tried to cross his pards when they robbed yuh, didn't he? His kind only listen to rope talk."

Donahan's eyes darted around him wildly. His lean face was gray, hard set, and a cold hand seemed to be clutching at his middle. He saw nothing of Rope Jordan or his men in the swift glance that covered half of the room, and a blaze of anger surged through him. He tensed himself, jerked savagely on the hands that gripped him, tore his arms free. He leaped upward, caught the rope that slanted upward from his neck, and the sudden weight of his body jerked the free end out of the miner's hands. He threw himself backward, twisting free of the hands that clutched at him and didn't stop until the wall was at his back. The mob lurched toward him again, and he faced them, lips white, flat, hard.

"Hold off!" he yelled. "You gents may lynch me, but I'm speakin' my piece first."

Something in the ring of his voice halted the lynch pack. He sucked air into his lungs, lashed out hot, bitter words.

"Yuh're set to string me up because yuh got the idea I murdered my brother. I didn't kill Roy Donahan. I was helpin' him in a plan he'd worked out to clean up the Black Jack gang. The three skunks that busted jail in Mesquite murdered my brother, an' I took their trail to finish his job without wastin' time explaining."

One of the miners broke in harshly: "That sounds good, Donahan. Gents like you would lie themselves cross-eyed to dodge a hang rope. Yuh're in the Black Jack gang. You tried to cross yore pards an' clear yoreself. Jordan figured that out, an'—"

Donahan laughed ringingly. "Jordan figured all that out, huh? Shore, he would! He'd do anything to save his own neck."

An instant of silence fell, freighted with the scent of death, broken only by the hoarse breathing of the lynch pack. Then a man spoke up gratingly:

"Meanin' what, Donahan?"

Bay Donahan leaned forward, hot blood driving through his lanky frame. "Meanin' that Rope Jordan an' his men are the Black Jack gang," he whipped out. "He had his men threaten to kill him, fake robbin' him so they'd be in the clear. Jordan's men came in here from huntin' me just after the Black Jack gang busted out with the gold they stole, right?"

One of the miners nodded jerkily, his weathered face bleak. "Jordan's men run up in time to throw lead at that gang when they rode off. We didn't see it, but we shore heard the shots."

A hard-lipped grin twisted Bay Donahan's mouth, and his voice came flat, cold. "You heard 'em shootin' at the stars, probably," he ground out. "All they did was pull off their masks, toss the gold pokes somewhere out of sight, an' start shootin' at nothin' to make you think the gang had rode off. An' yuh swallowed it like they wanted yuh to."

A man snorted sarcastically. "But we ain't swallerin' yore lies, younker. Not with a story as wild as that, we ain't. Jordan an' his men rode to town after the sheriff, but we ain't waitin' that long. We got a rope around yore neck an' we're goin' to use it."

The sullen rumble of the mob swelled again as the lynch pack shifted forward. Donahan didn't try to fight them off, but stood quietly, his eyes cold, mocking. They caught him, jerked him around.

And then the shot roared out. The lynchers halted, stiffened, eyes flaring toward the doorway where the little gent stood. It was Sam Hennis crouching there, smoke writhing upward from a gun gripped in his hand. His face was bleak, expressionless, and there was ice in his pale eyes.

"Seems like I ain't been invited to vote on this lynching," he drawled scratchily. "I'm puttin' in my vote anyhow. Pull that rope off, gents. Me an' my gun say no hanging. I reckon Donahan was tellin' the truth, an' he can prove it if he gets a chance."

The mob hesitated under the threat of the gun in Sam Hennis' hands, then one of them cursed softly, pulled the noose open and flipped it from Donahan's head. No expression reached Donahan's face to hint the thoughts racing across his brain. He shoved through the crowd, lips flat on his teeth. He crossed the floor to the spot where the tenderfoot's dead body still lay, bent and stared at the small mound of yellow dust where the gold poke had been. Then he straightened, faced the crowd grimly.

"You didn't give me the chance to check this before," he drawled. "One of you old-timers take a look at this gold an' see what you think."

The men hesitated, then a grizzled oldster stepped forward, bent and stared at the spot where Donahan's finger pointed. He took one look, then twisted around on his heels, his eyes bright.

"This stuff didn't come out of no claim," he growled. "Not like it is now."

Donahan chuckled bleakly. "Shore it didn't," he said coldly. "That stuff is part of the bullion that was stole from that wrecked train. Jordan got it, filed it into dust. That's what they salted the claims they sold the tenderfeet with. That's why Jordan had his men rob the pilgrims—he knew you old hands would smell somethin' funny once you saw their gold."

A muttering of rage ran through the crowd. A man cursed softly, then headed grimly toward the door.

"I'm gettin' my hoss. Them dirty skunks won't try to get away on hossback. They'll take the train an' it don't hit Copper City for three hours yet."

The crowd shifted forward, clogging the saloon doors. Donahan followed, saw Sam Hennis angle around and come up at his side.

Hennis' face was void of any expression and his pale eyes were still cold, bright.

They shoved through the doors, pulled up shortly. Donahan heard a man's bitter laugh.

"Hell, they cleaned the rail, drove off the hosses!"

At Donahan's side, Sam Hennis spoke up scratchily: "They didn't get mine. It's around back of the saloon, but—"

A sudden thought flared across Bay Donahan's brain. "Wait a minute," he clipped. "Maybe one hoss will be enough. Jordan don't know we're on to his game an' he thinks I'm dead by now. Maybe we can bring them skunks back here. If they thought them claims they sold the pilgrims was rotten with silver—"

One of the old-timers caught on, smothered an oath. "By hell, it'll work! An' I got some silver ore to back it! I'll burn it to town an' start yellin' how I sneaked into one of them claims an' found it lousy with silver. I'll bet my pants Jordan never had any of that rock assayed. When he hears that none of the pilgrims know about it an' how I want to borrow some money to buy 'em out—"

CHAPTER IX.

GUN PARLEY.

THE blue haze of early morning blurred the fog of dust that trailed toward the rocky gulch from the direction of Copper City. From the second-story window of the saloon, Bay Donahan watched the oncoming riders grimly. He rechecked his guns, then pouched them, a tight-lipped grin on his mouth. His left hand slipped up the front of his shirt to the bloodstained badge pinned there.

"It worked, Roy," he muttered softly. "They're ridin' their hosses to the ground to get here. An' I reckon they can't get here too soon to suit me."

He turned away from the window, went down the balcony steps to the main room. The miners were down there, the tenderfeet nervously pacing the floor, the old-timers stolidly lounging around, fingering guns they had dug out of their packs.

"They're comin'," Donahan said softly. "Looks like the whole town is on its way here, but Jordan's bunch is leadin'."

It was a signal for the tenderfeet. White-faced, they left the saloon and began taking down the tents they had set up near their claims. Several of the miners stalked wordlessly out of the building to take their places behind the boulders that dotted the gulch.

Donahan turned to Sam Hennis, hunkered down near the window. "Yuh've been wantin' this chance, ain't you?" he drawled.

Hennis heeled around, his pale eyes blank. His hands hung close to the butts of two guns thrust under his belt. He searched Donahan's face narrowly, a thin smile on his lips. Then he nodded coolly.

"I reckon I'll throw my share of lead where it hurts the most," he growled. "Them Black Jack skunks are long overdue a gunnin'."

Donahan nodded, his lean face blank. "Yeah," he said. He crossed the saloon floor, stooped behind the bar, pulled out a single age-molded boot. He turned to Hennis, saw Hennis' eyes narrow then go wide.

"Jim Eaden's boot!" he croaked. "Then I was right! I figured the gent that chased Nancy was one of the gang. He swiped it an' brought it here like I guessed."

Donahan smiled thinly, grim little lines webbing the corners of his eyes. "I found it where it had been tossed alongside the saloon last night. It was one of the gang all right. He headed straight here after leavin' the Star E."

Outside, the *clop-clop* of hoofs sounded in front of the saloon. Donahan glanced out the door, saw Nancy Eaden climbing out of the saddle. He pushed through the saloon doors and she saw him, swift relief finding her troubled eyes.

"I had to come," she said quickly. "I was worried. Is everything all right?"

Donahan nodded. She was nice to look at; small, slender, in split riding skirt and the loose blouse she wore. Her rust-colored hair held the glint of the early-morning sun in it. And then he thought of the Black Jack gang riding here.

"You shouldn't be here," he snapped. He went down the porch steps, two at a time, gripped her arm, pulled her toward the saloon doors. "You've got to get out of sight and stay there."

Then she saw the boot hanging from his other hand. She halted stiffly, grabbed the boot from him, thrust her hand inside. The hope that had flared in her eyes died out.

"It's gone!" she cried. "The paper is gone!"

Donahan nodded bleakly, his eyes slanting down the gulch toward the muted thunder of running hoofs that beat on the still morning air. He faced the girl, his lips flat and hard.

"This is no time to worry about that paper," he grunted. "I think the gent that stole it still has it. Now get yoreself hid. That's the Black Jack gang comin', and they won't be particular who their lead hits."

He shoved the girl into the saloon. She hesitated, her dark eyes full on his hard face, then turned and ran up the steps toward an upper room. Donahan took his position at the side of the saloon doors. The girl hadn't seen her uncle hunkered down near the window, and Sam Hennis had made no move to attract her attention.

Donahan peered through a crack in the door, jaw ridged with knotted muscles. He saw Jordan and his men pull up, their horses lathered and streaked with dust. The gambler's eyes were narrowed, darting swiftly around him. The rest of the gang reined in behind him, alert, bright-eyed, gun-wary. Jordan saw the tenderfeet working with their tents, a thin grin curling his lips. He slid off his horse, motioning his men after him as he stalked off toward the tenderfeet.

"Hey, you!" he boomed. "I decided to buy you gents out. I had some money in the bank that the Black Jack gang couldn't get an' I got to thinkin' maybe you needed a stake more than me. How's five thousand cash for your claims?"

The tenderfeet turned, moved toward the gambler in a body. One of them hedged in a shaky voice.

"We paid ten thousand, Jordan. None of us are rich, and—"

"All right, I'll settle for what yuh paid me. That'll give yuh a new start."

A pale, drawn-faced man shifted uncomfortably. "How about the one of us that was murdered? He had a wife, you know, and kids—"

Rope Jordan's lips tightened and he flashed a nervous glance over his shoulder.

"Him, too," he rasped. "Now dig out them deeds an' sign 'em over to me. That'll make it legal. I've already made out the checks an' the

dinero yuh gave me for the claims is in the bank to cover 'em."

One of the tenderfeet took the checks Jordan held out, glanced at them, then took a sheaf of papers out of his pocket, handed them to the gambler. Jordan's muddy eyes widened in surprise as he riffled through the deeds quickly. He looked up, a dark tide of blood flooding his heavy face.

"Why . . . why, yuh already had 'em signed over to me. *You knowed I was comin' back!*"

Bay Donahan, his lean face bleak, expressionless, stepped through the doors. He halted stiffly, cracked out coldly: "Yuh're right, Jordan. We been waitin' for you an' yore Black Jack gang. The gent who came to town yellin' about the silver he found here was lyin' as much as you when yuh salted these claims. Laugh that off, yuh stinkin' polecat!"

Rope Jordan whirled as if stung. His men turned, recognition flaring over their hard-bitten faces. For an instant they only stared, then they seemed to coil down over their guns, eyes cold, deadly, flecked with murder lust. One of them choked back a hoarse curse.

"Boss, that Donahan jigger—"

Rope Jordan cut the man short with a snarling oath. His face, that had at first gone pale, blackened with mounting rage. His voice came harshly, throbbing with hatred.

"You can't bluff me, Donahan. You can't prove nothin'. You better be worryin' about yore own neck. The sheriff an' his posse will be here in another minute."

Bay Donahan smiled mockingly. "Yuh should have made shore of yore job when yuh tried to kill me in Skull Canyon, Jordan. That slip-up will cost you yore neck."

Jordan laughed hoarsely. "Yuh'd lie yore grandmother into a hang noose to save yore own neck," he jeered. "Yuh can't prove nothin'."

Donahan chuckled mirthlessly. "Maybe I can," he said softly. "There's this claim business. You sold them tenderfeet salted claims, then stole the gold yuh salted 'em with."

Jordan's lips curled. "Prove that, Donahan," he sneered. "Yore talk is big but it won't hold in court."

Donahan's eyelids crawled down over icy eyes. "I think it will," he drawled. "It will when I prove the gold yuh salted the claims with had been filed off the bullion that was stole from the wrecked train."

One of the outlaws strangled a curse, his hand sliding down toward his gun.

"Rope—"

Jordan broke in harshly: "Shut up! Let him talk. He's diggin' his own grave, damn him!"

Donahan bent cautiously, felt behind him with his left hand, pulled the boot from behind the door inside the saloon. He straightened grimly.

"An' there's this boot," he said softly. "It's the boot Jim Eaden had the list of yore gang in when he was murdered. When the court sees that list—"

"*We been crossed!*" The hoarse words ripped from Rope Jordan's thinned lips. As if one, the hands of the outlaw pack blurred at their hips. Sunlight glinted from the barrels of flashing guns. The morning air split to the throbbing roar of bouncing Colts. Donahan drifted back until he felt the wall of the saloon against his shoulders. His guns jumped and blared in his hands, came to life spitting flame and smoke. Lead ripped through his clothes, burned his skin, slapped

into the wall on all sides of him; but his eyes didn't shift from the outlaws crouching in front of the saloon, their lower bodies fogged by their own gun smoke.

A wizened runt of a man went down first. He didn't know when Donahan's slug hammered into his skinny chest. He just pivoted drunkenly, swayed—then crumpled to the ground.

From the corner of his eyes, Donahan saw the saloon window splintered by a slashing gun barrel. Sam Hennis leaned out, both guns bucking in his hands. He didn't look like a prospector now. He looked like a gunman. He looked like a killer.

Then the guns of the miners, hidden behind the boulders along the gulch, roared into life. A stumpy, thickset man squalled shrilly, crashed to the ground, fought to his knees, his gun still hammering, then flopped face down in the dust as death at last overtook him. Another spun on dancing toes, guns spilling from hands that clutched blindly at his bullet-torn face. He stumbled weakly over his own feet, sprawled out limply in the dust, jerked once, and lay still.

For an instant Rope Jordan held his ground, flanked on one side by a chunky, wedge-faced man and on the other by a stringy, lantern-jawed killer. Then they broke under that crossfire of flaming lead. Jordan yelled above the roar of his guns, dived for the corner of the saloon, followed closely by the other two killers. Across the gulch, a miner yelled in a high-pitched voice:

"They're headin' up the side stairs!"

Another man yelled ringingly: "Hell, they're holin' up where that girl is!"

Donahan felt his blood run cold in his veins. Three long strides carried him the length of the porch. He hurdled the porch rail, struck the ground in a loose crouch. His guns tipped upward in his hands, snouting toward the chunky outlaw, just in the act of diving through the door. He snapped a quick shot that raked the boards at the side of the killer's head.

The man whirled, his guns blazing. Lead drove high into Bay Donahan's shoulder, spinning him around! He caught himself with an effort, chopped down with his right gun.

The killer collapsed at the top of the steps. His chest caved in. He tottered, spun half around, stumbled into the guard rail. Then his legs wilted under him and he pitched forward, to hang face down over the rail.

The shrill scream of the girl rang in Bay Donahan's ears as he lurched toward the stairs. He reached them, started up, then halted stiffly, staring at the figures moving out on the landing above.

Nancy Eaden came first, her small face pale, her lips wincing with the pain that came from her arm shoved up between her shoulder blades by the gambler striding close behind her. Jordan's gun was shoved into the small of her back, its cocked hammer held under his tense thumb.

Donahan backed to one side, his taut lips edging with bands of white.

Jordan saw him, laughed harshly, his muddy eyes flecked with deadly lights.

"You got the idea, Donahan," he sneered. "Just back off an' stay peaceable. The girl'll live longer that way. Make a crooked move, an' by hell, I'll blow her in two."

CHAPTER X.

KILLERS DIE HARD.

A BIG man with a sheriff's star pinned on his vest thundered up ahead of a dozen or so townsmen who had been brought by the news that there was silver in the ground around Jordan's saloon. Donahan flashed a glance over his shoulder to see the lawman slipping to the ground, his thin body stiff. He was a rangy man with a bushy thatch of iron-gray hair and a jaw like a vise. His cold gray eyes flicked around him, then riveted on the two killers coming down the saloon steps behind the girl. His voice boomed out vibrantly:

"What in thunder, Jordan! Put down that gun, dammit, b'fore that girl gets hurt."

Rope Jordan laughed thinly. "You ain't bein' funny, sheriff. Now get to one side and stop jawin'. This girl is goin' with us just to keep us out of trouble."

The lawman's leathery face went gray. He lurched forward, dragging at his guns. "I don't know what this is all about," he grated, "but I'm findin' out. Jordan—"

Bay Donahan whirled, his face tight set. "Cut it, sheriff," he whipped out. "You're dealin' with what's left of the Black Jack gang."

The sheriff pulled up stiffly, his square jaw shading gray, guns sagging down in his hands.

Bay Donahan turned toward the saloon steps. He was no more than two yards from the killers, but no muscle moved along his lanky frame. He knew what the slightest move against Jordan would do to the girl. He didn't like to think of it. He stared bleakly at the gambler, lips thinned in a sneer.

"It takes a yella rat to hide behind a girl, Jordan. Step out in the open an' I'll bust yuh in two."

Jordan's mouth curled. His muddy eyes, slitted, glinting, shifted around him watchfully. They were like the eyes of a rattler—killer eyes, unblinking chips of jet, deadly.

"I got two things to do before I leave here," Jordan rasped. "Yuh're one of them, Donahan. It'll be lead poison this time instead of rattler."

Donahan laughed jeeringly. If he could get that killer off guard, bait that gun muzzle away from the girl's back—

"You better make shore this time then," he taunted. "Yuh're done for, Jordan. You tried to frame me into bein' hung as one of yore gang. I've been blamed for killin' my brother. Yore men done that murder, Jordan. You rigged up that job for 'em, then crossed 'em."

"Spillin' that won't do you no good now," the gambler retorted, his voice a cold monotone. "I'm killin' you, Donahan. An' my second job is to kill the real boss of the Black Jack gang, the jigger that crossed us up. He said that boot didn't have no paper in it when he got it from the girl. He probably tore his own name off it, or he'd be dead now. He wanted us wiped out so's he'd have all the gold for himself, but, by hell—"

A faint movement beyond the side window of the saloon caught Bay Donahan's eyes. The stringy killer behind Jordan saw it, too, yelled hoarsely.

"Rope! Look out—"

Rope Jordan twisted around savagely. That same instant a gun blazed, shattering the window, burning a red furrow along the gambler's neck. The stringy man's gun bounced, crashed. Inside the saloon a man screamed. Stumbling foot-

steps thudded across the rough boards of the room; the bat-wing doors pushed open, spilling out the falling body of Sam Hennis. Rope Jordan cursed hoarsely.

"You got him! Damn that—"

He tried to twist back around as Bay Donahan drove forward. Donahan's long arm speared out, caught Nancy Eaden's arm, spun her around. Jordan's thumb lifted from the hammer of the Colt pressing into her back. The slug ripped through her blouse, missed her body, spurted dust from the ground a few feet away!

Then, almost in Donahan's face, Rope Jordan's gun roared again. He felt the biting sting of burning powder, the hot breath of the bullet as it fanned past his cheek. Donahan's gun snapped up, blazing, throbbing. The impact of the heavy slugs sent shivers racking down the gambler's big frame. His dark eyes glazed, rolled, struck with the horror of coming death. He swayed drunkenly on limbering legs, slowly toppled forward.

Donahan leaped back as Rope Jordan fell. From the corner of his eye he saw the stringy killer who had been behind Jordan leap to one side, guns chopping down savagely. A hand of ice clutched at Donahan's middle. He tried to spin, swivel his gun, but he knew that time wouldn't wait for the lead about to belch from the muzzle of the Colt hacking down on him.

As if from a distance, he heard Nancy Eaden's choked scream. And in that same flashing instant he saw a blue-rimmed hole appear in the middle of the man's forehead, heard a miner's heavy voice bell out behind him: "Got him! Tallied that skunk where it did the most good. But that jigger who cut loose from the saloon—he might've got that girl killed!"

Bay Donahan turned, color breaking into the gray of his face, a thin wraith of blue smoke pluming upward from the gun in his hand. He helped the girl to her feet, saw the pale oval of her face turned up toward him anxiously.

And then the sheriff stalked up, leathery face rock-hard. He stared down at Jordan's motionless body, then at Bay Donahan.

"Jordan said he wasn't the real boss of that gang. Too bad he didn't live long enough to spill the skunk's name. If he hadn't spilled that talk about his men murderin' yore brother, I might've figured *you* was the skunk. But now—"

Donahan smiled crookedly. "Yuh won't have to worry about the boss of the Black Jack gang, sheriff," he spoke up. "The gent's already dead." He pointed a rigid finger toward Sam Hennis' motionless body on the saloon porch. Nancy Eaden followed his pointing finger, then flashed her eyes back to Bay Donahan. Her eyes were wide, misty.

"But . . . but that's—"

Donahan nodded slowly. "Hennis was their boss," he said softly. "He was crossing the gang to get all the gold for himself. I reckon he caught on to Jordan's plan to skip out on him. He slipped outside after Jordan's men held up the tenderfeet, the way I figure it, swiped the saddlebag full of gold pokes an' left another filled up with rocks. Jordan never had time tuh catch on. An' about that boot of yore dad's—Hennis stole that. He killed Whitey an' Bowley to make it look like the gent outside had got in an' done the job."

The girl's hands fluttered up to her lips. "But he couldn't have,"

she forced out. "We saw him leave. He didn't have the boot."

Donahan smiled faintly. "He had it, all right. He was *wearin'* it. Hennis has little feet an' yore dad's boot was plenty big. He just slipped it over his own boot, pulled his jeans down over the top, an' walked out of the house. I caught on when I saw the tracks of one big boot an' one little one outside in the dust."

"But there wasn't any paper in it when you showed the boot to Jordan," the girl said haltingly.

Donahan chuckled softly. "There was while Hennis was wearin' it," he drawled. He strode up on the saloon porch, stooped over the body of Sam Hennis. He picked up one foot, pulled an age-yellowed piece of paper from the sole. He came back from the porch, grinning.

"Hennis told the truth when he told Jordan he didn't find no paper in that boot. He couldn't, 'cause it was stuck on the sole of his own shoe all the time. That pitch he got on his boot when he kicked the gate open at yore house done the trick."

Nancy Eaden's eyes were dimmed with mist as she looked up at Bay Donahan. She smiled, her lips trembling slightly. "I . . . I guess you finished dad's job for him," she said softly.

A bitter light came to Donahan's smoke-blue eyes. His left hand raised to brush over the bloodstained badge pinned to the front of his shirt.

"I finished my brother's job, too," he muttered.

She turned away, and he followed her. She looked up at him, and he grinned down at her.

"I got a little cow spread up north," he drawled easily. "Maybe after yuh get to know me better, yuh'd like to come up there an' see it. Of course, the road to my place only runs one way. Yuh'll have to stay once yuh get there."

Behind them, the sheriff growled under his breath. "Hate to see that younker go," he said. "He'd make one damn good lawman!"

One of the miners chuckled softly. "I reckon he is one," the man rumbled.

BEGINNING NEXT WEEK

MURDER RANGE

a six-part novel by

WILLIAM F. BRAGG

The Story of a Range That Was a Powder Keg, Charged With Hatred, and of the Spark That Blew a Peaceful Cowman's Combine Into a Killer's Clan!

THE WHISTLIN' KID MEETS HOODED DEATH

By Emery Jackson

Behind those black hoods were black hearts—and a range mystery written in human blood!

THE weird procession filed silently and solemnly along the the dusty main street of Las Setas. It was high noon. The shadows of the riders gathered themselves beneath the horses' bellies.

Twelve caped and hooded men. Around each neck was a short halter made of new rope, noosed in a hangman's knot. The hoods that covered their heads, and hid their features almost completely, were sup-

plemented with black masks of clinging material, making their faces seem shapeless and grotesque, with only the gleam of stern eyes looking through the slits.

The Kid stood on the porch of the Grangers Hotel, and watched them pass.

They rode in two platoons of six, and between them was one man who seemed to be their prisoner. He was an old man, hatless, with a short gray beard, his eyes deep sunk and dull, his flesh the color of old putty. He was clad in a blue flannel shirt, faded blue jeans and scuffed boots.

There was a much longer halter about his neck, the slack of it coiled and whanged to the lariat ring of his worn saddle.

His mount was a fleabitten gray, little better than a bag of bones.

The horses of his escorts were black as the robes they wore, but the Kid believed that most of them had been swabbed with dye. Only two had glossy hides, the rest were dull of hair. On all of them the brands had been covered by some sort of black paste that completely blurred them.

The gray-bearded man sat his horse more like a stuffed dummy than a living man.

There were several men on the porch with the Kid. At that hour there were no waddies in town from the outfits. Tradesmen and their clerks and customers, loungers and strollers, lined up thinly on the stilted sidewalks. A crowd had gathered in the Mexican quarter of the cowtown and trailed the hooded hombres.

All stared in silence, broken only by awed whispers.

There was a deputy sheriff at Las Setas, beside the town marshal, and the Kid wondered what they were about. It seemed evident that these were vigilantes, the prisoner someone of whom they intended to make a public example.

This was outside the law. These hombres had taken the law into their own hands. The Kid did not doubt that, beneath their long capes that trailed over the cruppers of their horses, they were fully armed.

There was an air of arrogant, aggressive purpose to them that defied interference. And there was no move on the part of the citizens to interfere.

The Kid himself was the law. He had with him his warrant and badge, but his wisdom, made keen on the grindstone of experience, for all his youth, told him to keep out of this.

Unless he was much mistaken it was too late.

Youngest and smartest range dick in the Cattlemen's Association, he had come to Las Setas to round up and deliver the rustlers who had been raiding the county outfits.

But he had not been able immediately to answer the call from the owners. Now it looked as if the owners had become impatient and formed themselves into a band of range regulators.

As they passed the porch, two abreast, he saw the nigh leader turn in his saddle, and regard him with a searching and baleful glance from eyes that looked like transparent agates in which a lambent light was flickering. No doubt, the Kid thought, he was recognized for a stranger.

But he was sure that none suspected him of being a range dick with his smooth skin and features unlined, save for the sun wrinkles at the corners of his dark eyes.

The Kid was tall, lithe and lean. His face was tanned dark as the holster leather of his six-gun .45. There was an almost Indian cast to

his hawkish features with the high cheekbones and the straight black hair, though there was no truth to the suggestion.

Most range dicks were far older than he, grizzled old-timers of the range. The Kid looked as if he had never cast a vote or used a razor.

He had not yet announced himself to the owners of the spreads, nor to the law officers of the town. Nor to anybody else. He preferred to size up the situation, saying little, seeing and hearing all he could, before he started in.

Now the bound captive came opposite the porch steps, and the Kid's dark eyes narrowed in his searching scrutiny. He knew his first hunch was correct.

There was a murmur among the men on the porch with him. One of them, about the same age as the Kid, broke through the group, brushed by the Kid, and leaped down the steps to the dusty road.

His voice was harsh with rage or fear, or both.

"It's Seth Mann," he cried. "Turn him loose, you polecats! Thet's my uncle, Seth. He ain't done no harm to nobody."

The nearest horseman reined in. A quirt appeared in his black-gauntleted hand, and he slashed the speaker viciously across the face. A red weal sprang up like an open wound. The lad was half blinded. He had no gun, but he crouched like a wild cat, ready to spring at the man who had lashed him, drag him from his saddle.

The hooded man swung up his quirt again. The Kid saw the elbow of another moving beneath his cape to shuck a gun.

In three leaping strides the Kid reached the reckless lad, and as he rose, thrust him back with one arm. The Kid's six-gun seemed to leap from leather to meet his right hand. The muzzle lifted, and the sight looked at the space between the rider's eyes. These eyes were light blue, pale as shore ice, cold and deadly.

"You can't do nothin' against twelve men," said the Kid to the lad who'd been whipped, while the rider seemed turned to stone in his seat, the lash of the uplifted quirt trailing.

He was a man who had faced death, and now he saw Death looking at him from the Kid's dark eyes, brilliant and brave and menacing as those of a hunting eagle.

"Git back," the Kid warned again. "You can't help him none now. Don't you see that man on the hoss is dead?"

There was no mistaking—to the Kid's keen eyes—the horrible limpness of the graybeard's body. It was seemingly boneless, held slackly upright by lines from belt and a band about his chest to cantle rings and saddlehorn, where his wrists were also bound.

The wound was not visible from where the Kid stood, but he believed that the man had been shot, and from behind.

On his chest a placard was pinned, made of white cloth, with black lettering painted upon it. It was a grim legend.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

WARNING
TO ALL RUSTLERS

LOS CASTIGOS

Los Castigos! The Scourges!

"Ride on, you coyotes," said the Kid. "It's well to hide your faces when you kill an old man. You didn't have the guts to face *him*, an' so you shot him in the back. Now you're showin' off how brave you

are. Ride on, unless you want to make somethin' of it. If so, thar's *one* of you won't git fur."

The absolute fearlessness of him, the assurance in his voice as he accused and challenged them, gripped them. The flashing draw of his hog-leg still dazzled them.

A man had come off the porch, and led the quirted lad back to the hotel, inarticulate with rage and pain, unable to see as his cut eyelids swelled.

"What we start we finish," snarled the man whose arm had moved beneath his cape but now was still. "This ain't a healthy climate fer them thet sides with rustlers. If you're friendly with owl-hooters, you'd best take warnin'. We aim to rid the county of 'em, one way or another. You best dust out of town."

The Kid looked at him for a moment of suspense that all shared. He broke it by a peal of hearty laughter that showed his absolute confidence in himself, and his mockery of them and their grisly parade.

Still, laughing, he stepped back a little, waved them on with the barrel of his six-gun.

"Git on with your show," he said. "I'll let you know when I git ready to leave town. Thet's a promise."

There was a little hesitation. The leaders started and the procession moved on. But it was really the Kid who was giving the orders and the crowd knew it.

Now the Kid saw the back of the dead man, saw the bullet wound at the base of his skull. He mingled with the crowd and followed on foot. They gave him plenty of elbow room, treating him with respect, if not with friendliness. He had done something they would not have attempted, all combined, and they were wondering both at his temerity and what might happen to him.

That did not bother the Kid. He halted, and watched with the rest as the riders halted in front of a warehouse. It had all been programed. No orders were given. Four men dismounted, while the eight others kept their saddles and ranged in fours, facing inward, to where two of the men on foot released the body from the gray horse. Two more went into the warehouse, taking with them the long halter rope with its noose, from the neck of the body that now lay on the ground.

Over the lower doors of the warehouse was another door. Above it a beam and tackle projected, for hauling up merchandise. One of the men got astride the beam, reeving the halter rope through the pulley so that both ends, bight and noose, dangled close to the ground.

The noose was reset about the neck of the corpse, the bight dallied to the saddlehorn of a man who spurred his mount. As the horse leaped the body of the dead man seemed to come to life, half rising before it suddenly was yanked brutally into the air. It jigged and jerked like a puppet, while the horseman watched over his shoulder, and reined in when the body was well off the ground.

The rope end was released from the horn and tied off to a hook in the frame of the lower doorway.

With the body dangling, swinging like a pendulum, those on foot remounted. The hooded hombres re-formed, and then, without command, split into two platoons and went galloping out of town, east and west, their sable robes streaming, the masked faces peering grotesquely out of their hoods. Dust hid them.

The citizens stared at the plac-

arded dead man, and then, with one accord, went to the saloons and cantinas to take the taste of the gruesome affair from their mouths. Nobody seemed to bother about the final disposition of the body.

To have killed the man from behind, and then to have hanged the body seemed to the Kid unnecessarily brutal.

If these hooded hombres were the owners, as appeared probable, the Kid reflected that he had not acted in a fashion that would put him on good terms with them. He had not actually opposed them but he certainly had not paid them any compliment.

Even when they found out who he was, they might not feel too friendly toward him, but he was not intending to reveal himself just yet. He already had a hunch or two about the situation at Las Setas. He wanted now to test those hunches, and find out some more about the nester who had been executed—if it could be called an execution—before he called on the owners.

The time of day was one when practically everyone would be absent from the outfits except cooks, choremen and owners. It would be easy for owners to leave, and return to their headquarters, without their business being talked about or suspected.

One of the Kid's hunches was that these men might not actually be known to each other when disguised, that they could assemble at some rendezvous after they were robed, on horses that were kept in secret places.

They were outside the law. It would be to their advantage not to be able to identify their comrades, and they would naturally deny their own names and share in such proceedings. That was the general custom of all vigilantes or regulators—as The Scourges called themselves.

There would have to be a leader, somebody who had started the movement, but his messages to the rest, covering orders for the whole program, could be delivered without giving him away.

The Kid went back to the hotel. The man who had led the injured lad away was there and greeted him. He gave his name as Payson, of the Circle P. Here at least, the Kid thought, was one owner who had not been in the parade.

The lad who had been struck worked at the general store. He had gone home to where he boarded, and Payson had got the doctor to attend him. He was, it appeared, the son of the dead man's sister, his name Decum, not Mann.

"He wrote his uncle when his folks died from fever," Payson said, "and Mann sent him his railroad fare. He lived with Mann fer a time on his holding, but Mann was a queer cuss. Lived like a hermit. Raised honey, an' sold it in town. Used to ketch horned toads an' dry 'em fer the tourist trade up to Phoenix along with rattlesnake buttons an' rock specimens. Reckon they was both suited when young Decum got him his job at the store."

"You figger thar's anything to the idee of Mann rustlin' stock?" asked the Kid.

Payson gave him a shrewd look.

"I don't know thet it's altogether the wisest thing to discuss right now," he said. "But I don't mind doin' so. Mann might have killed him a young beef for meat, mebbe once a winter. Most nesters will, an' they ain't apt to be begrudged it. But you saw his hoss. He warn't no yearlin' himself. I don't see how he'd line up as an owl-hooter.

What's more, I don't approve of this secret bisness. A man should come come out in the open?"

"How about the sheriff?"

"Over to the other end of the county, servin' papers. Easy fer them to know thet, an' pick their time. The marshal's hired by the town, an' he ain't much more'n a watchman. He'll side with what he thinks the town wants at the time. I didn't notice him around none today.

"You wouldn't know who thet hooded crowd was?" the Kid asked.

The shrewd look came into Payson's face again.

"I wouldn't, son. I wouldn't even figger on guessin'. One thing's sartin, you had your nerve with you when you horned in. You did a right thing, an' you may need your nerve ag'in before you're through with them Castigos. How about a drink?"

They went into the barroom of the hotel. It was pretty well crowded, and the Kid felt that the way they looked at him was not altogether cordial. Some of them, he figured, were siding with the Los Castigos, whether they knew who they were or not. Others were not going to stand out by taking any sides. A few seemed friendly, but none eager to show it, outside of Payson.

The Kid ordered ginger ale and somebody sniggered. He was a rough-looking customer. He was standing close to where Payson and the Kid lined up at the bar.

"Promised your maw not to tech the nasty stuff, did you?" asked the man.

"He drinks what he likes," said Payson. "You could cut down on redeye yourse'f without it hurtin' you none, Kiley."

The Kid looked at Kiley serenely. He sized Kiley up for a small-town bully, shifty-eyed, weak of jaw. But the crowd seemed interested.

"I got a good reason fer not drinkin' hard stuff, Kiley," the Kid said. "I don't mind showin' it to you. If you kin do the same as I do, with a skinful, I'll down a pint of whiskey. If you can't, you drink ginger ale, an' set 'em up fer the house. If you ain't convinced, I'll pay fer the drinks."

Kiley sneered. The idea of buying drinks for the crowd did not appeal to him, but he did not think he would have to. Meantime the crowd were in high favor of the bet. The Kid was not showing off. He had a good reason for letting the crowd know he was not to be interfered with. He was going to back up what he had already done outside.

There were red-headed, wooden friction matches in a holder on the bar. The Kid took one of them.

"You wouldn't want to hold it while I light it, I suppose," he said to Kiley.

"What kind of a fool trick are you aimin' to pull off? I ain't bettin' on no tricks."

"It ain't jest a trick," the Kid answered. "But I reckon you couldn't hold it steady enough."

Kiley snarled. The crowd was ready to laugh at him. They watched while the Kid took a wooden chair, and set it on the top of one of the small tables. The chair was old and its seat was cracked. The Kid wedged the end of the match into the crack firmly, turned and paced off the length of the bar.

"About twenty feet, I reckon," he said. "The idee is to light the match, without smashin' the stick, an' to do it the first time, without sightin' on the draw."

They grew quiet, standing aside. The feat seemed almost impossible. The red match head was a small target close to, tiny at the range the Kid had chosen.

He stood there smiling at them. As they watched him closely, he took his sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket, made a little trough of the brown paper, and sifted tobacco into it. Then, left-handed, he made a quirly, and twisted the end. It held their eyes for a moment. They did not follow the Kid's lightning draw, but they saw the spurt of muzzle flame and heard the bark of the .45.

They shouted in unison, all save Kiley, who stared with bulging eyes and slack jaw, with the rest. The match was alight and flaring, still upright in the crack.

When they swung their gaze to the Kid, his six-gun was back in leather and he was drawing on his quirly. The puff of smoke he exhaled mingled with the drift of powder vapor from his gun.

"How about joinin' me in some nice ginger ale, Kiley?" he asked.

Kiley's mean face turned a dark red. He ripped out an oath, forced his way through the crowd to the side door. His horse was in the alley. He mounted and they heard him galloping away.

"Four-flushed," said Payson. "I'll set up the drinks any time I see a shot like thet."

"No, you won't," said the bartender. "Gimme thet match an' it'll pay fer the licker. I'm keepin' that as a sooveneer."

It was a good deal for the bar, the Kid knew. It would draw plenty of trade to look at it, stuck into the frame of the back mirror for exhibition. He did not know whether he had gained the good will of the crowd, but he had their respect. That might make it easier for him to pick up the information, though he felt that would not be too easy. The town was still under the spell of the hooded hombres.

He said little and listened a lot, but he had not learned very much when Payson suggested going back with him to the Circle P.

There was a good deal of general talk about rustling, but few wanted to discuss the killing of the nester. They seemed agreed he must have been guilty. That, the Kid told himself, was exactly the effect Los Castigos had meant to bring about.

But there was something wrong about it to the Kid. He meant to get to the bottom of it, if not by one means, then by another. That was his job. He excused himself to Payson and promised to ride out later to his spread.

II.

The Kid sat beside young Decum in his room at the boardinghouse. The lad's eyes were badly swollen, but his sight was not injured. He was still filled with rage at the killing of his uncle, and the Kid listened to him, understanding just how he felt.

"He was mighty good to me," said Decum. "He had funny ways an' he liked to live alone, but he never told me so outright. Maw said he was disapp'inted long ago, when his girl went off with another man. Sorter soured him on folks. He used to go out lots alone, an' stay away a couple of days, collectin' his curios. But he never rustled no steers, never had truck with no rustlers. An' I'll kill whoever killed him, if it takes the rest of my life!"

"I savvy, Decum. Might not be

sech a long life, an' you might not git to revenge him. You see, you ain't trained fer thet sort of a deal. I am. I aim to do jest thet thing—if your uncle was murdered, I'll round up the ones who did it."

"You? Why should *you?* He warn't your uncle. I know you told 'em off this noon, but—"

"Listen, Decum. This ain't to be give out. It'll likely come out later. You can't see right good, so I'll read this paper to you. It's my identification warrant, made out fer Peter Prentiss of the Cattlemen's Association. Thet's me. An' this is my badge. You kin *feel* thet. I'm here to git to the bottom of the rustlin'."

"You mean you're a range dick?"

"Thet's it. Now you think back an' try to remember if your uncle ever told you anything about meetin' up with rustlers, or havin' trouble with 'em, or anybody. Might help a lot."

"I can't think of nothin'. He was mighty close-mouthed. For days he'd hardly say a word, not becos he was sore at me, but it was jest his way. Wait—wait a minute—"

The Kid waited, whistling under his breath his favorite tune, "The Cowboy's Lament." He had a strong hunch he had struck a lead.

"He did say somethin' once about bein' warned off a place up in the hills where there's a rock they call The Medicine Stone," young Decum said. "It was sort of sacred to the Injuns one time. It's got a hole through it an' he used to git a lot of arrer an' lance heads round there. They meant money fer curios. He was mad over gittin' told to stay away. 'Lowed he had as much right there as anyone."

The Kid's dark eyes gleamed. "Didn't say who they was?"

"One of 'em was a man named Kiley. The other was a half-breed. Thet made him sore, too. He had no use fer breeds. They had rifles. He said they come out of the rocks while he was lookin' fer arrerheads. Stuck him up."

"They did, did they? You couldn't tell me jest how to locate this Medicine Stone? Never mind," the Kid went on as he saw Decum shake his head. "It ought to be easy to find out."

"You think thet's a rustlers' hideout? You think them Castigos, or whatever they call 'emselves, suspicioned thet, found uncle up there an' then— Uncle said he was goin' back there, Kiley or no Kiley. He was mighty stubborn."

"I don't know," said the Kid, "but I aim to find out."

He did not think much of Decum's theory. He felt he had a better one, and he was going to waste no time proving or disproving it.

"I can't bear to think of him hangin' like thet," said Decum. "He ought to be took down an' buried. But the whole town's agin' him."

"I'll tend to thet, son," said the Kid. "An' you'll attend the funeral. You won't be alone, neither."

"You're swell," said Decum. "You're right, too, about me not bein' able to do much. I don't see how you're goin' to manage it."

That end of it was not so hard. The sheriff had returned, and the Kid had a talk with him, finding him furious over the action of Los Castigos. The sheriff examined the kid's identity papers with interest.

"I've heard of you," he said. "You're young to have a rep like you got, but we sure need you. I got too much to handle an' these rustlers have been too slick fer me. They're organized—right. In one way I kin hardly blame the owners

fer hangin' one when they caught him, but—"

"Mebbe it *wa'n't* the owners." Then, as the sheriff stared, the Kid went on. "Might have been the rustlers themselves, dressed up, killin' an' hangin' this poor nester because he knew too much, or because he was too nosey—"

"I don't foller you right through," said the sheriff. "Of course, it could be pulled off, to fog their own trail."

"There'd be others beside Seth Mann, later on, mebbe. But I got a hunch they killed *him* because he knew somethin' they thought he'd spill, then used the murder fer an alibi. You'll hear an' see more of these Castigos, if they ain't stopped. You know the owners. Any of 'em got light eyes, one very pale blue an' the other the color of crick agates?"

"Lawson's got pale-blue eyes, but he's laid up in bed with a busted leg. I don't know of any owner, or nobody else with pebble eyes like you mention. There *was* one hombre drifted into town a while back though, thet would match up. He didn't stay long. An ugly cuss with a busted nose, an' ha'f one eyebrow sliced off, or blasted. But he ain't been round fer quite a spell."

"Was he ever friendly with Kiley?"

"With thet snake? Listen, Prentiss, Kiley might be a rustler, at thet, but he warn't one of them hooded riders. I heard about your run-in with Kiley. You want to watch out fer him, though I reckon you kin take care of yourself. I kin find out if he consorted any with this hombre."

"Best not ask questions. They may have other friends. I see Mann has been cut down. I've been talkin' with Decum. He wants him buried."

"He'll be buried," exploded the sheriff. "I made Tim Sloane take him down. Sloane's our marshal. I told him jest the sort of coyote he was, to permit it. Mann's down at the undertaker's. He never rustled a turnip. Honest as the day."

"Good! What do you know about a rock with a hole in it they call The Medicine Stone?"

"I know whar it is. Injuns used to worship it, they say. Made medicine there for their arrers. When the wind's right it booms through the hole an' I reckon they thought it was the Great Spirit, talking."

"Is it far?"

"Six or seven mile. Tough goin' the last mile through the mesa breakdown. Why?"

"How about goin' there with me, tonight?"

The sheriff was not a man easily startled. If he ever was he did not show it. Now his eyes widened a little, then narrowed to normal. They were keen, steady eyes of gray. He might admit the rustlers had been too slick for him, but the Kid rated him high as a man to ride the river with.

The Kid did not always cotton to sheriffs as partners, but this one was going to be a real help, that might be sorely needed. The Kid did not mind odds. He had often been thought foolhardy. But he knew he might be cutting a pretty big slice for one man to chew this trip, if certain things happened that he expected.

"Tonight?" asked the sheriff with a drawl. "You got any idees about thet Medicine Stone?"

"I got sevrul, sheriff. Some of 'em might work out. I got an idee Kiley *might* be one of thet outfit, mean' the hooded hombres, an' figgerin' 'em rustlers. Likely he stayed

out of the parade to see jest how folks was taking it. He *might* be goin' to convey thet news to 'em tonight. They *might* have a hide-out at the Medicine Stone. At any rate I'd like to sort of mosey round thet place. Night's the best time. Tonight there's a moon—an' there's no time like the present."

"Figger you'll find all twelve, besides Kiley?"

"Hard to tell. I figger some of 'em stays out of town fer the most part. Others might not. We may git 'em all or none. If we git some they'll come through, an' we'll round up the rest. Thet's the way it genrully works out."

"You want I should git a posse?"

The Kid shook his head. "I'd ruther you wouldn't, sheriff. There's times when a posse is plumb necessary, but times like this they are too apt to advertise they're comin'. You an' me, we'll act together, an' think alike. You can't expect thet of a bunch of private citizens all worked up over the idee of capturing desperate criminals. They're amateurs an' we're professionals."

"Right," said the sheriff, "you're dead right. You got an old head on them young shoulders of yourn. I'm with you. Take about two hours to make it. Moonrise at midnight. We should start 'round ten. There ain't much chance of findin' them asleep. Doubt if Kiley'll go up there much ahead of us. An' he'll sure tote 'em some redeye."

III.

As the moon lifted over the shoulder of the mesa it shone through the hole the wind and grit had made long ages since in The Medicine Stone. The wind was blowing tonight and every now and then it would reach the right force and pitch, and a low, eerie moan that sounded like the wailing of the Indians for their lost heritage would come from—or through—the hole.

Mists about the crests seemed like ghosts of the warriors haunting the place where their wizards had once made medicine. The moonlight that came through the gap focused on the rocky floor of a gulch. All about it, above and below it, were tumbled masses of granite, great dikes of barren stone where nothing grew, with streams of once-molten lava here and there, the stuff from which the redmen had made their arrow and lanceheads, and their knives.

It was a place of mystery, weird and savage as the setting for a robbers' roost, well suited as a rustlers' hide-out.

The Kid and the sheriff had left their horses on a lower shelf. They climbed with care, alert for every sound, for every scent, for the reflection of a fire, the sight of hooded horsemen.

The night was quiet and clear, except when the wind, silent for the most part, in the absence of trees, groaned through the sacred stone.

It seemed small use to look for sign in such a wilderness where the rock held no prints, and the pockets of soil were scanty and shallow. In full daylight they might have found some, in the shape of stone fractured by shod hoofs, or horsehair caught in crevices. Now it seemed pretty hopeless, until the Kid spotted the glitter of glass where the rising moon displayed it.

It was a broken flask. There were a few drops in the heel of it, and they were mescal. The dead nester, Mann, would not have drunk mescal. It was far more likely the

half-breed who had been with Kiley, and warned Mann off, or some of their *compañeros*.

The shattered flask was in a narrow draw that seemed to end in a cliff. They looked for a cave there and could not find any. The moon did not get to that spot, but they made a close search before they climbed to the top of the cliff and found a fairly flat terrace.

It had not been a difficult clamber, but horses had certainly not come that way. If the black horses, natural and dyed of hide, were brought this high, they were stowed away somewhere. There were plenty of places, no doubt.

The moon merely silvered the rough rim of the terrace. It was still shadowed by a great buttress. It was wide, close to a hundred feet, the Kid reckoned. To their right, where the rimrock ran and the terrace curved along the contour of the mesa, there was a ruddy glow that seemd to come out of a pothole. It was the light of a fire. They could hear voices, laughter, and the faint odors, when the breeze died down, of tobacco and broiled meat.

The Kid's ideas had been right. This was the hide-out, high on the mesa. The glow rose and fell as they neared it.

The pothole, a natural formation, was about twenty feet deep, roughly twice that in circumference. It was an unroofed chamber, a vertical cavern. Two rough ladders led down to its floor. The fire was in the center, and about it seven men sprawled on blankets, ponchos, tarpaulins and serapes. The irregular sides showed cavities whose depth could not be judged in the uncertain light.

The fire burned with occasional flashes from resin or gas pockets in the wood, throwing everything into sudden relief of light and shade, revealing the fierce, hard faces of reckless men plainly.

The Kid recognized Kiley almost instantly. So did the sheriff, whispering to him. One man looked up, laughing, and tilting a tin cup to his mouth. It was the man who had stared at him from the head of the procession, the man with the eyes like creek pebbles, cruel as the eyes of sharks.

"That's him," the sheriff whispered again. "I remember his name now. Murray."

It seemed hardly possible the whisper had been heard, but a man almost opposite Murray glanced upward—and his eyes were ice-blue, the eyes of the man the Kid had thwarted when he tried to quirt Decum.

They wore no hoods, no robes. They were villains undisguised, without pretense. The ice-eyed man suspected nothing. He held out his cup for a drink from a jug that passed around.

"They fell fer it," Kiley was saying. "When the sheriff hit town he was plenty sore. Made Sloane cut down the body. They all figger you was the owners rigged up. They'll fall fer it ag'in. I seen Red and the rest before I left. They're circulatin' round, in case folks might wonder where they was, but there ain't nothin' to worry about."

"I ain't worryin'," said Murray.

The ladders were on opposite sides of the pit. "I'll git round to the fur side," whispered the Kid, "then we'll challenge 'em—make 'em come up one at a time to us, and disarm 'em."

It was a sound plan and it seemed simple. The Kid crept along the

rimrock. There was a ledge below, about the same depth as the pothole, untouched by the moon.

"Did you see anything of thet squirt thet drew on me?" asked the ice-eyed man of Kiley. "I'd have handled him right then an' there, only I didn't want to break into the program we'd fixed."

The Kid chuckled silently. He knew the man was trying to save his face. Kiley did the same thing, lying as he said he had not seen the Kid again.

It was time to act, and this seemed a good cue for his own entrance on the scene.

"You want to hold a match fer me, Kiley?" he said.

For a moment it was as if a bomb had been dropped into the pit, and lay there with fuse spitting, while they watched it in stunned silence, gazing upward. The Kid and the sheriff stood back from the edge of the pothole, unseen themselves, gazing down.

"Who in blue blazes is thet?" demanded Murray. He was startled and nervous at this voice coming mockingly out of the night, and at the knowledge that his hide-out was discovered. Then the sheriff spoke.

"It's me, for one, Murray. Jed Gilson, sheriff. We got you surrounded. Might as well climb up without trouble, usin' both ladders. We know you shot Mann because he wouldn't stay away from here. You're covered. Unbuckle your belts an' come up them ladders."

The Kid spoke again from across the pothole.

"This is Prentiss, of the Cattlemen's Association, speakin'. I'm the one stopped Mann's nevvy from gittin' quirted. You hung Mann after he was dead. One of you, anyway, is goin' to hang while he's alive. Mebbe the hull lot of you. You're all a bunch of murderin' polecats. Stand up an' drop your belts before I start shootin'."

That he meant what he said was plain. They got to their feet, and, under cover of the movement, one them picked up a bucket of water and flung it on the fire. It was a clever move. Instantly a cloud of steam came up from the hissing, expiring embers, screening them.

The Kid shot at the man who had thrown the water, saw him drop, floundering, and got a vague vision through the vapor of men bolting to the side of the pothole. They might be running for cover—or they might be going to some exit the shadows had hidden.

He cried out to the sheriff:

"Watch thet ledge right back of me, sheriff."

Then he slid down the ladder beneath him, his back to it, his legs gripping the sides. The surface was rough and splinters dug into his flesh, but he did not notice them.

The sheriff had given them an idea they were surrounded by a posse, but they would soon find out differently, unless they made their getaway.

A piece of pitch pine flared up, and the fire began to recover as the water went up in steam, and the fierce heat bit again into the wood. It lit up the pothole as the Kid stood at the bottom of the ladder.

Lead nipped his outer arm—his left arm—as he fired in the same instant at a crouching figure, and saw the man roll over and over, to lie still at last, one hand in the embers, lifeless.

The Kid heard the roar of the sheriff's .45, raking the ledge to which some must have escaped through a tunnel. He saw the en-

trance to it, now, by the reviving fire. It was blocked by two cursing, struggling men, fighting to get through.

Crash!

That shot came from one side, where a man had sneaked through the shadow. It took the Kid in his thigh, and his leg buckled. He dropped to one knee, supporting himself by one hand as Murray came grinning into the firelight, taking careful aim, his pebbly eyes reflecting the crimson of the flames.

The Kid squeezed the trigger. Murray's face suddenly changed to an expression of bewilderment as he dropped his gun, and clasped his belly, where the Kid's bullet had gone low with the shock of his wound. Crimson flowed in a stream between the rustler's fingers, and he fell flat on his face. He, for one, would not hang.

A scream came from the tunnel. One man had stabbed another. The knifer backed out as the Kid threatened him. It was Kiley, who groveled.

"Don't shoot," he begged. "I ain't got my gun. It come out while we was squeezin' to git through the tunnel. I'll tell all I know. It was Murray who shot Mann!"

"Shut up." Kiley had just killed a man himself. The Kid's voice was harsh. Now there were four dead in the pothole. The sheriff came to the edge of the pit.

"You O. K., Prentiss? I got two of 'em on the ledge. One rolled off after he was shot. You don't look like you needed much help."

The Kid's leg was wabbly, his arm bleeding, but he knew they would be all right, with a tourniquet and a bandage.

"You might ride herd over Kiley, sheriff," he said. "He'll tell us where to find their hosses, an' the outfits they wore, an' give the names of the rest of the gang, I think. How about it, Kiley?"

"Sure I will," Kiley answered as the sheriff came down the ladder and prodded him in the ribs with the muzzle of his six-gun.

The Kid looked at the face of the man whose charred hand lay in the fire. Dead eyes, cold as the ice they matched—pale, lifeless blue, caught the light of the moon as its beams slanted into the pothole.

Wherever his job as ace range dick of the Cattlemen's Association calls him, the Whistlin' Kid goes. And his lightning draw and iron nerve have made him famous throughout the whole Southwest. Look out for another action-filled yarn about him soon.

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

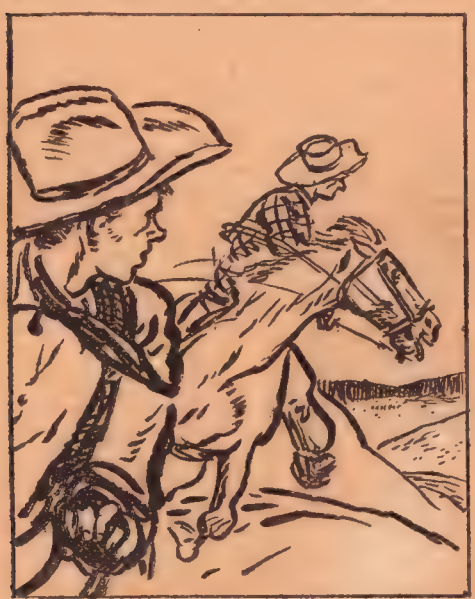
and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the Invisible God-Law, under *any* and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. S.S., Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. S.S., Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

BRONC EVANS'

1. Horse thieves had raided the Bar A. Outside an empty corral, Bronc Evans met a cowboy named Tip Weems. "Them rustlers got my trick hoss Blacky an' three others," said Bronc. "Will yuh help me git 'em back?" "Shore," Tip said.

2. They rode out of the ranchyard and followed sign that the thieves and the stolen cayuses had left behind. The trail led into wild, rocky country. "Jest like I reckoned," growled Bronc. "Them hosses was drove fast into Owl Canyon, Tip."



3. Tip was a new Bar A hand, and he was worried about getting bawled out by Bart Albers for going with Bronc. Whirling his horse, he rode back to the ranch. Bronc reined in and watched him go. "Go on, hightail it," he muttered. "I'll ride on."

4. The sign led to a corral hidden deep in Owl Canyon. Bronc dismounted and looked over the rails. Inside were a black horse and three other cayuses. "They're my Blacky hoss an' the other Bar A cayuses I been trainin'," he ground out.

TRICK CAYUSE

5. Two tough-looking jaspers jumped out from behind a clump of bushes and pounced upon Bronc, their fists hammering his face and body. He fought desperately, but the odds against him were too great. He slumped to the ground, out cold.

6. The two range bums picked the unconscious Bronc up and lugged him inside the corral. There they set him down. "We'll stampede them hosses over him 'fore he comes to," one jasper said. Bronc heard it, for he had revived.

7. Firing their six-guns, the two jaspers scared the horses into a wild stampede, Blacky in the lead. Bronc jumped to his feet as the stampede swept toward him. Waving his arm in signals he used in horse training, he shouted, "Blacky, whoa up!"

8. Blacky whinnied shrilly and slowed his gallop. Bronc ran beside him and grasped the top of his neck. Springing up from the ground, Bronc vaulted aboard Blacky's bare back. He had practiced that trick with the black cayuse.

9. He landed astride Blacky's back. Turning the horse with knee pressure, he raced back toward the end of the corral. One of the horse thieves jumped in front of Blacky to stop him, firing a six-gun at Bronc, who bent low in the saddle.

10. The thief was excited, and his bullets missed. With Blacky charging at him, he jumped to get out of the way, but was too late. He and the horse collided. Blacky crushed the screeching hombre down and trampled him.

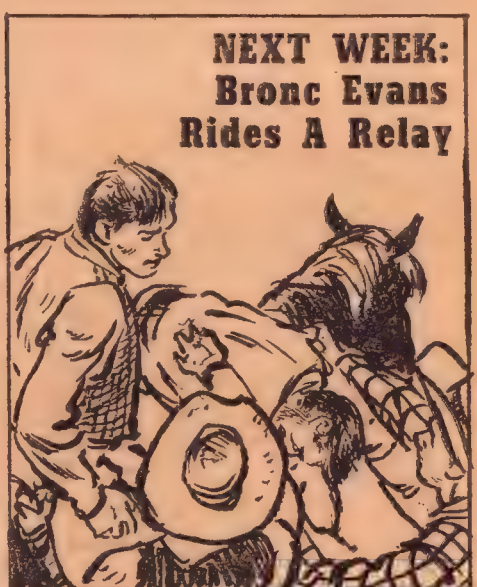
11. The other horse thief ran to climb over the rails and get out of the corral. Bronc sent Blacky charging at him to head him off. This was the game of hide-and-seek that Bronc often played with the horse. Blacky took it seriously.

12. Guided by Bronc, Blacky brushed past the fleeing thief at close quarters. Reaching down, Bronc grabbed him by the collar of his flannel shirt. The jasper howled blue murder as Bronc lifted him bodily up onto Blacky's back.

13. A punch to the point of the chin knocked the horse thief cold, Bronc holding him on as he struck. The jasper went limp in Bronc's grasp. Bronc held him tighter to keep him from falling off the horse and rolling under its churning hoofs.

14. Bronc slung the thief over Blacky's back in front of him. The cayuse was heading for the corral fence. It jumped off the ground and rose into the air like a bird. Over the fence Blacky soared, his hoofs barely skimming over the top rail.

15. With the horse thief slung over Blacky's back, Bronc rode out of Owl Canyon. Several cowboys rode toward him, Tip Weems among them. "I told the boss whar yuh'd gone, Bronc," Tip sang out. "He sent us out to look fer yuh."



16. The prisoner had recovered consciousness. Two Bar A waddies hauled him to the ground and dragged him away. Bronc shuddered as he looked on. He knew the fate of a horse thief in the West —a speedy trial by old Judge Lynch.

Fast Gunnin'

By ARTHUR L. RAFTER

When a posse corners Marto's band
In the hills by Cougar Gap,
Marto an' Shaw, a renegade hand,
Fight clear of the posse's trap.

But Kansas Kit has got the guts
To chase 'em down the slope
For a couple of miles through windin' cuts,
Till he runs smack into a rope.

He wakes in a roofless dobe shack,
Stretched out on the dirty floor,
With both hands tied behind his back,
An' Marto stands in the door.

Then he sneers at Kit: "Shaw tells me thet
You shoot like lightnin', *si?*
So I show thees Shaw, an' I mak' a bet
You no shoot fast like me."

Shaw covers Kit as he gits to stand,
When Marto cuts the cords,
While he leans on a table that's close at hand,
Made up of rough-hewed boards.

Then Marto moves in a snaky way
To the table opposite Kit.
'Twixt both on the boards, their six-guns lay,
With butts right handy to git.

"When I count to three yuh reach for a gun,"
Says Shaw. "Don't start ahead.
If anyone moves before I'm done
I'll fill him full of lead."

Kit's breath comes kinder short an' thick
As Shaw starts countin' cool:
"One—two, then three!"—an' Kit grabs quick
For Marto's shootin' tool!

Kit turns an' drills the startled Shaw
Before he kin fire a shot.
Then he shoots down Marto, who's tryin' to draw
The mate to the gun Kit got.

"I knowed that murderin' Mex was lyin',"
Says Kit, "so I fooled the coot.
An' I shore was right, for my shootin' iron
Was fixed so it wouldn't shoot."

SONNY TABOR FIGHTS ALONE

By WARD M. STEVENS

SONNY TABOR FIGHTS ALONE

One against many, the death-swift gun hand of Ranger Tabor stabbed flame and lead in the face of grinning murder.

By Ward M. Stevens

CHAPTER I.

THE SHERIFF SPEAKS HIS MIND.

THE sheriff of Pima County, Walt Westcott, got out of the swivel chair he'd been straddling, cowpuncher fashion, and extended his pudgy hand in greeting to the hombre who had just entered the office with the announcement that he was a Ranger.

"Ranger, eh? Jest *one* of yuh? I wired Captain Moffat to send me every available man," said Westcott testily. "A single Ranger won't be of much use to me!"

"I'm sorry, sheriff," the Arizona Ranger said regretfully, "but I was the only man at headquarters when yore message came. Moffat himself is over in the Sulphur Springs Valley to settle a range dispute, so I put my bronc in the baggage car and took the train. Yuh've had a bank robbery here, sir?"

The young hombre was displaying no badge, and there was nothing about him to suggest the law officer—unless it was the businesslike way he wore his Colt six-guns. These were blue steel single-actions, caliber .45, and were tucked into low-thonged holsters of oiled leather. The rest of his outfit—flannel shirt, brown bat-wing chaparajos, Stetson and Coffeyville boots—might have belonged to any range rider.

He was in his twenties, but looked even younger, either because of his frank and innocent blue eyes, or because of the faint dimple that marked one cheek. But there was no weakness in his face, any more than in his lithe, narrow-hipped body.

Sheriff Westcott hadn't been able to see very well, at first, for the blaze of late-afternoon sunlight was behind the Ranger as the door opened. At the other side of the room, though, Deputy Rushton had been writing at another desk. He was standing now, rigid and speechless. He had recognized the Ranger from the very first.

"Isn't . . . isn't yore n-n-name Tabor?" Rushton stuttered.

"Yes, it is," the Ranger admitted quietly.

It was hardly any wonder that Deputy Rushton was startled. Only a few weeks ago this young hombre's picture and description occupied a place of honor—or dishonor—among the "Wanted" posters that plastered the office walls. "Dead or Alive," it had read, in letters two inches high, "$6,500 Reward!"

Sheriff Westcott, in the act of relighting his cigar, nearly singed his bushy white eyebrows, for he understood now. His eyes met those of his deputy, then strayed automatically toward the white spot on the wall where the poster had been so recently. Almost from force of habit, his right hand moved toward the butt of his gun. He remembered

in time, and jerked it away sheepishly.

"I didn't reco'nize yuh at first, Tabor," he said apologetically, after a painful pause.

"I would've known *you* anywhere, sheriff," said the Ranger pleasantly. "It wasn't so long ago that you were chasin' me with a posse."

Walt Westcott winced, for the recollection wasn't a pleasant one. Sonny Tabor had made rather a fool of him—as he had of almost every sheriff in the Southwest.

"I . . . I'd heard, of course, about Governor Meredith givin' yuh a pardon, and an appointment to the Rangers," the sheriff said slowly and grudgingly. "To be right frank with yuh, Tabor, I didn't approve of it. In my opinion, once an outlaw, allus an outlaw—especially a man with yore record as a killer." Westcott had spoken hesitatingly at first, but his word gained force, and he finished almost breathlessly. "In other words, I can't believe that yuh've reformed! Yuh don't deserve to be a law officer!"

This was being "told off" with a vengeance, and no mistake! Sonny Tabor, however, did not flinch, nor did his smile fade. Only the flush that crept under his tan betrayed how much he had been hurt.

"Sorry yuh feel that way, sheriff," he said cheerfully, "but let's just get down to cases about the bank holdup. From what I hear, five masked hombres pulled the job. They killed two of the three bank men, and got away with ninety-six thousand dollars in cash. Is that right?"

The rawboned Deputy Rushton took the cue from his boss. "I don't think we'll need yuh on this case, Tabor," he said flatly. "Yuh'll be more of a hindrance than a help. Ain't it so, Walt?"

Something of the boyishness vanished from Sonny Tabor's face, at that, and the "dimple" in his cheek resembled what it really was—the puckered scar of a .45-caliber bullet.

"I'm in on this whether yuh like it or not!" he flung back, and his voice took on a static crackle. "I took an oath to uphold the laws as best I could, and no sheriff can stop me."

"Suit yoreself, then!" Westcott growled. "Only don't look for any help here! Yuh're on yore own hook, Tabor, and if yuh're smart yuh'll vamoose back to Bisbee. Jist tell Captain Moffat—"

"Adios, for the time bein', sheriff," the ex-outlaw drawled as he turned toward the door. "I'll prob'ly have some prisoners for yuh soon."

"We'll git thet gang without *yore* help, gunny!" gibed the lanky deputy sheriff, but Sonny Tabor didn't hear. He had quietly closed the door behind him and stepped out into the sunlit street.

He had to smile, in spite of the tongue-lashing he'd received, for he understood that Westcott's resentment wasn't entirely personal. Many Arizona sheriffs were more than a little jealous of the Ranger organization. They envied its success in dealing with border criminals, and sometimes they weren't able to conceal that envy. Sonny wondered why Westcott had called for help at all.

"They don't like us, Paint," the Ranger murmured as he swung aboard his black-and-white spotted pinto. "Well—we've got a job cut out for us. A big one, too."

Paint gave an understanding snort. Like his master, the wiry little piebald had "owl-hoot" in his veins. He had shown his heels to so many sheriffs that he had lost his respect for the breed.

The sun was setting behind the black and volcanic Tucson hills when Ranger Sonny Tabor rode the short block back to the main stem. He left Paint at a hitch rail on Congress Street, and walked around the corner to the building occupied by the looted bank. Of the three in town, it was the smallest. Sonny found it closed, with a card in the window saying that it would remain so until the arrival of the bank examiners.

Sonny knew ways of getting information. The town had awakened after its lazy afternoon siesta, and knots of men, both white and Mexican, were gathering on the cooling streets, and the Ranger mingled with them without attracting attention. He learned a good deal without having to ask a single question.

Sauntering with the aimlessness of a cowhand on pay day, Sonny Tabor wandered into the Hanging Wall Saloon, and out again, then drifted into the Golden Spur. Here he found the hombre he sought, the sole survivor of the bank tragedy, Frank W. Scott, who had worked as teller.

Scott, a handsome man in his thirties, mustached and with somber, almost tragic, dark eyes, was standing at the long bar of the sumptuously furnished saloon, surrounded by a group of curious, news-hungry townsmen. Everybody was talking about the robbery, and all the Ranger had to do was listen. Nobody paid any attention to *him*. Every eye and ear was trained on the bank teller.

"They've prob'ly skipped clean out of the country," a ruddy-faced prospector was saying. "The shuriff has drawed off his posses, ain't he? He had Injun trailers, too, but they couldn't find nary a bit of sign."

"Them bandits is in Mexico by this time," agreed another hombre.

"Did yuh reco'nize any of 'em, Frank?" one of them asked the bank employee.

"They were masked—how could I?" Scott snapped irritably. He poured a stiff drink from the whiskey bottle at his elbow and took it at a gulp. Sonny noticed that his hand shook so that he slopped some of the liquor onto the bar. Scott seemed strained, nervous.

"They say thet one of the robbers was wounded," the bartender put in. "Was it you, or the cashier, Scott, thet—"

"It's crazy to say any of 'em were hit!" Scott cried angrily.

"Well, they found a saddled hoss with spots on the saddle, an'—" a tall cowpuncher ventured, but the bank teller cut in sharply.

"Nonsense! The cashier fired a shot, I think, and so did I, right at the beginning, but we didn't hit any of 'em." Scott took another drink of whiskey. "I agree with yuh, Mac, when yuh said they'd made their getaway. The dust storm covered up every track."

"And a pile o' money they got away with, too!" the cowpuncher ejaculated. "Ninety-six thousand! Did the bank generally keep so much cash on hand, Scott?"

"No, it's several times what we—usually—the bank had the money that day for a certain purpose," said Scott with gathering hesitation. He had turned pale and his arm trembled visibly as he struck a match for his cigarette. "I . . . I'd rather not discuss it, gentlemen," he concluded. Nodding curtly to the men at the bar, he walked rather unsteadily out of the saloon.

They stared after him. "Nobody except the bankers could have knowed thet all thet dinero was in the vaults thet day," was the hoarse whisper of the prospector.

Sonny Tabor yawned, leisurely picked up his change, and, leaving his glass of beer unfinished, followed Frank Scott out into Congress Street.

CHAPTER II.

SUSPICIOUS ACTIONS.

IT was almost dark outside, the soft air was like blue velvet, and the summer constellations were already winking in their diamond designs on the great, arched sky overhead. Lamps were being lighted, and the odor of mesquite smoke hung over the town to mingle with the typical border smell of settling dust, of horses, and spicy chile peppers. After a while the moon would be climbing out of the Santa Ritas.

Sonny kept far enough behind his quarry to avoid being suspected, close enough to keep him well in sight. He didn't want Scott to know, just yet, that the eyes of Ranger law were on him. It was still too early in the game to show his cards.

Scott walked down toward the Mexican section, with Sonny half a block behind him. At first he thought the bank teller meant to cross the bridge across the sandy bed of the river, but instead he turned to the left and entered the most ancient part of the Old Pueblo, following a narrow street lined with adobe shops and dwellings. Not wanting to lose sight of his man, Sonny narrowed the gap.

He made the turn just in time to see Scott enter a *botica*, or native drugstore. In the dusty window, lighted by a lamp that shone through a jar of purple liquid, was a yellowed sign:

FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ, M. D.
MEDICO Y CIRUJANO

Which meant in English, as the Ranger knew, "physician and surgeon." What business could Frank Scott have with this Spanish doctor? Sonny Tabor dodged into a deeply recessed doorway to wait for the bank teller's reappearance.

The street was crowded but the ex-outlaw knew from long experience how to make himself unobtrusive, and he drew no notice from the sandal-shod Mexicans or from the heavily shawled woman who passed by him. Time dragged by—minutes that seemed hours. A tamale vender shuffled by, singing his wares. Sonny sampled one and, struck by an idea, he asked the vender, in Spanish, if there was a back door to the drugstore.

The breed shook his head. "You wanta buy marajuana?" he grinned. "I sell you some, *muy barato*."

"*No quiero*," said the Ranger, shrugging. He was after bigger game.

Sonny Tabor's patience was at last rewarded. Frank Scott emerged from the *botica*, accompanied by a tall and spare hombre in black clothes. The latter was carrying a satchel, and Sonny guessed that he was the doctor. The two men went into a darker and even narrower side street, with the Ranger following as closely as he dared.

They paused before a dingy, flat-topped dwelling that bordered an alley, and here Scott took leave of his companion and hurried away along a street that would take him back to the main part of town. The medico disappeared inside the house.

Knowing that he could probably lay hands on Scott at any time he pleased, Sonny let him go. Deciding to investigate the heart of this mystery, he sidled cautiously along the alley until he reached a window. Things were beginning to shape up

now—he was fairly certain of the nature of the doctor's errand.

The small window that pierced the thick wall was unglassed. A cloth tacked up inside covered it, but there was a space at the bottom, and Sonny could see as well as hear what was taking place inside.

The room, which had an earth floor, was bare except for a small stove, a still smaller table, a flimsy chair, and a rumpled bed. On the latter a man lay sprawled at full length, his face away. He was groaning, and was evidently in pain. The medico was already attending him, and was taking instruments and rolls of bandages from his case.

"*Puf!* But this is a bad business, señor," Fernandez was saying. "The wound, though, seems better than yesterday. Tonight I must probe for the bullet."

The doctor, a middle-aged man with a kindly face, set to work, making a fire in the stove to heat water. Sonny watched for a few minutes, thinking hard.

The wounded hombre, without a doubt, was one of the bank robbers, and that explained Frank Scott's agitation while being questioned in the saloon. Things were dovetailing nicely, and Sonny decided to pick up Scott for questioning.

Returning to Congress Street, he made inquiries in a shop and learned that Scott lived with his mother at the end of a street in the north side of town. He vaulted aboard Paint and after some little difficulty, he found the house, a good-sized dwelling of adobe brick, fronted by a walled-in patio.

The moon was up now, flooding the mountain-hemmed valley with a vague and mellow light. In its silvery glow Sonny saw, somewhat to his surprise, two saddled horses standing in front of the Scott house. What kind of company, he wondered as he dismounted, was the bank teller entertaining?

He softly released the catch on the wrought-iron gate and walked across the patio to the front door of the *casa*, and he had just reached it when it swung abruptly open. Sonny heard the sound of a woman sobbing as Frank Scott, ghostly pale and with handcuffs on his wrists, stepped out of the house.

Right behind him, with satisfied smiles lighting their faces, were Sheriff Walt Westcott and Deputy Rushton.

CHAPTER III.

THE SHERIFF SCORES.

AT the sight of Sonny Tabor the two Pima County officers jumped as if a scorpion had tail-slapped them. Westcott was quick to recover his composure, however, and his round, fat face expanded into a tantalizing grin.

"Quite a surprise, Tabor, seein' you here!" he said sarcastically.

"What are yuh doin', follerin' us?" the deputy glowered.

Sheriff Westcott deliberately lighted a cigar. "I hope yuh didn't think, Tabor, thet yuh were stealin' a march on us," he chuckled. "Why, we've had Scott under surveillance ever since the robbery, and could have taken him into custody at any time."

"If yuh've got it in yore noggin' thet we're dumb, kid," the deputy said with a veiled sneer, "yuh'd better change yore mind some! All right, Scott, step along!" he ordered sternly. "We're lockin' yuh up tonight—without bail."

Frank Scott's face was like a frozen, tortured mask in the moonlight. He could hear his mother crying heartbrokenly inside the house,

and the sounds seemed to fill him with despair.

"I'm not guilty," he said jerkily. He looked dully at Sonny Tabor, but seeing nothing in the Ranger's expression to give him hope, he dropped his eyes. "Take me to jail then, sheriff—but don't torment mother any more."

He was marched across the little, flower-scented patio between the two local officers, who paused long enough at the gate to fling a mocking "Good night, Ranger," at Sonny Tabor. Then they were gone.

The door of the house was still ajar. Sonny doffed his battered, cream-colored Stetson and entered the little hallway, clearing his throat to let Mrs. Scott know that he was coming.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said apologetically. "I'm sorry to bother yuh, but—maybe I can be of help. I'm an Arizona Ranger, ma'am."

Mrs. Scott was a slight, frail old lady. Sonny doubted if she weighed ninety pounds. She was rocking back and forth in her misery, vainly trying to smother her sobs with a handkerchief. Sonny's attempts to comfort her were useless, at first. Finally, he went right into the kitchen and brewed her a pot of tea.

"Now you take this, ma'am," he urged. "And then, when yuh feel better I want yuh to tell me all about it."

"They . . . they say Frank—"

"I know, Mrs. Scott," said Sonny Tabor encouragingly, "but I'm shore that it's all a mistake."

"Are you? Oh, I'm glad to hear you say that," she cried, becoming calmer at last. "You see, just because Frank worked in the bank and knew about that shipment of extra cash being there, the officers think that he was in partnership with the robbers. My Frank wouldn't dream of anything like that! He's a good man—good."

Sonny nodded sympathetically. He had a different opinion about Scott's innocence, but he was careful not to allow this poor mother to guess what he really thought. If guilty, the bank teller deserved a horsewhipping for causing this woman so much grief.

"I've had so *many* worries lately," sighed Mrs. Scott, gratefully sipping the tea that the Ranger had brought to her. "My younger son, Jim, has been away. I wish he'd come back. I need him so much now."

"So Frank has a young brother?" Sonny questioned, intensely interested. "He isn't here, yuh say?"

She shook her head sadly. "No, Jim has always been—well, sort of wild and harum-scarum. Not bad, really, but Frank always worried so much about him. Jim's only nineteen."

Sonny was sure, now, that he had the key to the mystery. The dark-eyed teller, chances were, wasn't implicated in any way. The mother's intuition of his innocence was probably correct.

"Did Frank discuss the bank's affairs with you, ma'am—and with his brother, Jim?" he asked quickly.

"Why, yes, sometimes," she admitted. "Frank had no secrets from us."

The blue-eyed Ranger reached for his hat. "I'm goin' to have to leave now, Mrs. Scott, but don't yuh worry. Sheriff Westcott will be chewin' his fingernails before this is over. Yore son, Frank, will soon be with yuh again, and Jim, too, I hope. Good night, ma'am."

Leaving the bank teller's mother in a much more cheerful frame of mind, the Ranger hurried out and swung aboard his piebald cayuse. His promise to Mrs. Scott hadn't

been given lightly. He smiled grimly to himself. The sheriff was doing a lot of hopping around—but on the wrong foot!

A few minutes' canter took Sonny back into the Mexican quarter of Tucson. He soon found the darkened street he sought, and after a turn or two he came within sight of the house where he'd left the wounded man and the doctor.

"Whoa up, Paint—easy," he whispered, tightening the rein.

A mounted hombre had just halted in front of the adobe hut, and to avoid being discovered Sonny Tabor drew Paint into the deeper shadows. Once again, it appeared, the Ranger had been anticipated.

Not by lawmen this time, however. The man who had so furtively dismounted, and who now was edging up to the door of the adobe, was an hombre Sonny had never seen before.

CHAPTER IV.

DEATH PAYS A CALL.

DR. FERNANDEZ, grave and silent, finished dressing the wounded man's leg injury. Then he began packing his instruments back in his black valise. His patient seemed to be feeling better, for his groaning had ceased and he was smoking a cigarette. His features, in the yellow glimmer of the kerosene lamp, seemed unnaturally sharpened. There were shadows under his feverish eyes and his cheeks were sunken.

"Thanks, doc," he said huskily. "I'm feelin' better—maybe I'll pull through this, after all."

The medico began washing his hands in a pan on the stove. He had rolled up his sleeves and his black coat hung over the back of the chair.

"You need not thank me, Señor Scott," he said solemnly. "Thank your *hermano*—your good brother. He hopes this will be a lesson. That is my hope also. *Ay de mi!* I am running a very big risk in treating you—"

"Yuh're gettin' paid for it, aren't yuh?" said the wounded man petulantly.

"*Si*, your brother paid me, but I don't do this for that," the doctor reminded him.

"It was Frank that shot me—and I don't blame him," said the youth on the bed. "He didn't know who I was, of course. I deserved it. Forgive me, doc, for talkin' the way I did. If it isn't too late—well, I'll go straight from now on. I'm not tryin' to excuse myself, but—I didn't know there would be any killing. I was in debt to Oaksford for gambling, and he practically forced—

"*Vaya!* This Oaksford then, he was the leader of the *bandidos?*" Fernandez asked.

"I've talked too much already," Jim Scott gritted. "I wouldn't tell my brother, and I wouldn't tell you. What—what's that?" he demanded apprehensively as the knob on the locked door rattled sharply. "Who's there?"

"*Quién es?*" echoed the doctor as he hastily slipped on his coat.

"It's Yancy," was the low-voiced reply from outside, and Jim Scott signaled reassuringly to Fernandez. "It's *bueno*. Let him in," he whispered.

The medico unfastened the door and a squat, powerfully built hombre in cowpuncher clothes came striding into the room. He might have been twenty-five, or ten years older. It was hard to tell anything from his face, for it was creased and wrinkled from the effects of liquor and dissipation. His greenish little eyes, cruel and closely set, passed

from the doctor to the taut figure on the bed.

"So yuh're still holdin' out, eh, Jim?" he said in a rasping voice. "Thought mebbe yuh'd kicked the bucket."

Jim Scott raised himself on his elbow, struggling to conceal his dislike of the hombre who had called on him.

"I'll make out. The doc here has patched me up a bit. How's—the bunch?"

"Pardon, but I will be going, gentlemen," the doctor said hastily. He picked up his satchel and started toward the door, but Yancy, who had his back to it, motioned him away.

"Jest stay whar yuh are, sawbones," he said, leering. "What did yuh say, Jim? The bunch? They're takin' the rattler to Californy tonight. I'm hoppin' aboard the eleven fifteen pretty pronto, and the other boys—except Oaksford—are catchin' 'er at Red Rock. We drawed lots, Jim boy, to see who came down here to see *you*. This is the pay off, kid, and I don't mean money!"

Young Scott knew what that meant! Gritting his teeth, he tried to struggle to a sitting position, but fell back limply. Yancy laughed at him.

"It's tough, Jim boy," he said, shaking his head in mock pity. "But yuh see, we figger yuh know too much. Yuh might talk, mebbe to yore brother, mebbe to somebody else. So—we're playin' safe."

The medico stood pressed against the far wall, his swarthy face shining with cold sweat, his black eyes wide with horror.

"You, too, doc," said the executioner, grinning wolfishly. He slid his big Colt .44 from its holster, thumbed back the hammer and leveled it casually from the hip. "I'm blastin' the both of yuh to sleep!"

He was taking rapid backward steps toward the doorway. In another moment his Colt would thunder out its call to death!

"Drop it!"

A lithe figure hurtled into Yancy from behind, striking with the speed of a cougar and the force of an exploding projectile! Before the killer knew what was happening he was on his knees, and his gun hand was being dragged behind his back in a bone-snapping hammer lock.

"What—in blazes!"

Yancy's unfired Colt thudded to the earth floor and he squalled with pain as Sonny Tabor gave him another terrific twist. Snarling like a rabid coyote, the desperado made a desperate effort, got to his feet and whirled about to face his attacker—just in time to get a whizzing bunch of knuckles squarely on the mouth.

"Yuh're arrested, hombre!" Sonny said freezingly. "I'm a Ranger!"

With a furious curse, Yancy leaped in at Sonny, his clublike fists swinging almost from the floor. The Ranger hadn't drawn his guns, and the bandit thought he would take advantage of that foolish oversight! The tooth-loosening left hook he had already received should have been a warning to Yancy.

Tabor waltzed lightly out of the killer's rush and belted him with a right hand that nearly tore his head off! And again he hit—and again—while the punch-dazed bandit was in the very act of falling. The adobe wall held Yancy up just long enough for the Ranger to slash him under both eyes, flatten his nose, and, with the final uppercut, tap him on the chin with all the gentleness of a blacksmith wielding a sledge hammer.

"I said," said Sonny Tabor in a tone of mild reproof, "yuh're arrested. Maybe now yuh'll believe it."

He handcuffed the half-conscious desperado, then turned to Jim Scott and the doctor, who were still staring, open-mouthed and bewildered. The whole thing had happened in the space of half a dozen breaths.

"I heard some of the things this hombre said," he told them in a matter-of-fact tone. "Aren't you Frank Scott's brother?"

"Yes, I'm Jim Scott," the wounded youth admitted, when he was finally able to control his vocal cords. "If yuh're a Ranger I reckon I'm—plumb up the creek. No use of me denyin'—"

"Señor Scott, it would be best to tell this officer the whole truth," Dr. Fernandez advised. "He has saved both our lives. Tell him, *Chico*."

"I think I know about all that I need to," said Sonny Tabor calmly. "I've a few questions, though. I heard this skunk say that the gang plans to take the California flier at Red Rock tonight—with the exception of Oaksford. Who is Oaksford, and where will I find *him?*"

Scott was eager enough to talk, now. He began at the beginning and told how he'd been unfortunate enough to get into the gang's clutches.

"I don't want to be a whiner, but after they started blackmailin' me I couldn't help myself," Scott muttered. "They said they'd kill me if I didn't get info for 'em about the bank. My brother's absolutely innocent—"

"He was arrested tonight by Sheriff Westcott," Sonny said quietly.

A groan escaped Jim Scott's rigid lips. "Poor mom! This will nearly kill her! It's all my fault, too. I've shore made a mess o' things, Ranger. What'll I do to save Frank? Won't they let him go, now you've arrested *me?*"

"I'm not arrestin' yuh yet," was Sonny's response. "No hurry about that—and I'm afraid the sheriff wouldn't let yore brother out of jail on my say-so. But tell me about this bunch, Jim."

"Jack Oaksford is the brains, the leader," the wounded man confessed. "He wasn't in town the day of the robbery—he's too clever for that. He just sent the gang—Yancy, Blacky Hogue, Pete Nylander, Mink Faber—and myself. I was the only one wounded. I made it to this place durin' the sandstorm, and then my brother—"

"Who fired the murder shots? Do you know?"

"Nylander, Faber, and Hogue," Jim said. "Yancy's post was outside the bank."

"And Oaksford's headquarters?" Tabor questioned.

"He's got a shack at the top of Little Pine Canyon, in the Catalinas."

Sonny nodded curtly, then went over and sat on Yancy for a moment, relieving him of a package of currency about the size of a brick. The money was in bills of large denomination, mostly fifties and hundreds. Yancy cursed feebly, but was too weak to struggle.

"This seems to be his share of the loot," the Ranger said, thrusting the money carelessly into a pocket of his Levis. "Yuh didn't get yores, eh, Jim?"

"No," said the wounded ranny in a shamed voice. "I never want to see a cent of that murder money."

"What time is it, doctor?" Sonny Tabor drawled.

With shaking fingers the physician took his watch from his pocket. "Five minutes until eleven, Señor Ranger," he quavered.

The Ranger dragged the manacled prisoner to his feet. "Come on,

Yancy," he snapped. "We've got only twenty minutes to catch that train, so get a move on!" He turned to Scott and the medico. "I'm leavin' Jim in yore custody, Fernandez, for the time bein'. Yuh'll hear from me soon, so until then—*buenas noches*."

Leaving the doctor and his patient blinking at each other in amazement, Sonny Tabor marched his captive out into the night.

CHAPTER V.

RANGER'S PRIVATE CAR.

SONNY TABOR and the much-battered Yancy rode into a convenient livery barn, where the Ranger turned their horses over to the stableman for safe-keeping.

"Be good, Paint, and I'll be back for yuh soon—if I'm lucky," Sonny muttered as he took leave of his faithful little bronc. "All right, Yancy," he ordered, "it's only a couple of blocks to the depot. Step lively."

At the Southern Pacific station he herded Yancy into the almost deserted waiting room and bought two tickets for Picacho, a little station several stops beyond Red Rock, which was in the neighborhood of thirty-five miles to the northwest of Tucson.

"We'll wait out on the platform, Yancy," he told his sullen prisoner as he pocketed the pasteboards.

"Yuh mean to say, younker, thet yuh're goin' to tackle Hogue, an' Nylander, an' Mink Faber—all by yoreself?" Yancy grunted incredulously. "Ain't yuh takin' no other officers with yuh?"

"A Ranger who couldn't handle three of *yore* cronies wouldn't be worth his salt," Sonny replied mildly. "Well, here comes the train."

A headlight had appeared in the east and it grew steadily brighter, turning the rails to long streaks of glittering silver. The sound of a locomotive whistle, mournful and lonely, broke the stillness, rose, and faded.

A grin had replaced the scowl on Yancy's bruised face, and his little, greenish eyes gleamed with malicious triumph. He wouldn't be a prisoner long, he thought. If this Ranger kid was going to be fool enough to buck three dead-shot gunmen like Faber, Nylander, and Hogue his rescue would only be a question of time. The lawman wouldn't have the ghost of a show—Yancy was so sure of that fact that his belly began to shake with suppressed laughter. What a hot and smoky surprise the Ranger would be in for!

The six-car passenger train came rumbling in, finally, drawn by its puffing, clanking mountain-type locomotive. Three or four passengers descended, but Sonny Tabor and his prisoner were the only ones to get on. They boarded the well-lit smoker, and took one of the dingy leather seats near the end of the coach. There were six or seven passengers in the car, some awake and some asleep. There would be a six-minute wait while engines were being changed.

Yancy managed to get his "makin's" out of his shirt pocket, but his handcuffs interfered when he attempted to roll a cigarette. Seeing his difficulties, Sonny laced one for him.

"Thanks," the bandit growled. He looked wonderingly at the young hombre who, he firmly believed, was doomed to die within the next hour. "Yuh ain't had much experience at this yere Ranger business, have yuh, *muchacho*? What's yore name?"

"My name's Tabor," said the Ranger briefly.

Yancy dropped his cigarette and made a gagging noise. He'd heard that name and knew what it meant, for it had been emblazoned across the whole Southwest. Conceded to be the most dangerous gun fighter in the territory, he had slain, in his outlaw days, more men than he had fingers and toes. Or at least Yancy had heard so. He turned a sickly, ashen gray. He was far from being so certain, now, that his pards would succeed in handling the situation.

"Listen, Tabor," Yancy croaked, as the train started with a jerk, "yuh was an owl-hooter yoreself once, jist like me, and why don't yuh keep thet dinero and give me a break?"

"I was an outlaw once, but not like you," Sonny drawled. "So save yore breath, hombre."

Strangely enough, Sheriff Westcott had the same unfair opinion of him that Yancy had. His past record was going to be hard to live down.

But the truth was, Sonny wasn't ashamed of what he'd been in the past. It wasn't his fault that he had been forced into outlawry in his earliest teens. He had been innocent from the first, and even when he was hunted like a wild animal, with a bounty on his head, he had followed the straightest trail he knew. That life had hardened his boyish soul, but it hadn't embittered him. It had made him deadly with his guns, but he had never abused that deadliness. And now he was on the other side of the fence, a Ranger. His existence was even more precarious, it was doubly dangerous now.

"Tickets, please," rumbled a genial voice, and Sonny glanced up to see the conductor, an enormously fat man in a blue uniform with brass buttons, standing in the aisle opposite.

Sonny handed up the tickets and the trainman punched two red seat checks and inserted them in the bands of the two passengers' Stetsons. He hadn't noticed, yet, that one of them was handcuffed.

"A mighty sultry night, gents," the conductor puffed, mopping his shiny forehead with his handkerchief.

"Yes, and it's apt to be hotter, amigo," the Ranger said calmly. "Will yuh kindly clear out this car, mister? Just send the other passengers into the coaches behind."

A dazed look appeared on the conductor's moonlike countenance. He bent lower, cupping a flabby hand behind his ear to keep out the roar of the train.

"Excuse me, but I didn't quite make out what you said," he apologized. "I thought you told me to clear out the car, and send the passengers—"

"It's what I did say," Sonny said unsmilingly. He reached into his pocket, fished out his small silver badge and let the gaping conductor have a look at it. "I want the use of this coach for a while."

"A Ranger!" the fat trainman wheezed. "Why, sure, I'll be glad to do anything you say! You fellers have done a lot for the Southern Pacific, catchin' train robbers and such, and I'll be proud to help you in any way possible! But, if you don't mind me asking—"

"I expect the Tucson bank bandits—three of 'em—to board this train at Red Rock," the Ranger explained. "I'm goin' to try and capture 'em, and there'll prob'ly be shootin'. That's why I want to be alone in the car. But don't alarm anybody unnecessarily."

"I . . . I see," gulped the conductor. "I heard about that double murder and stick-up, and I hope you get those killers! You seem a little young, though, to be facing three

armed and desperate criminals like that! It seems to me, mister . . . er . . . what's the name?"

"Name's Tabor."

"Eh? I'll get the passengers out right now!" blurted the trainman excitedly.

The car was soon cleared, except for an Eastern traveling man who was asleep and snoring across the aisle from Sonny. The Ranger had to shake him by the shoulder.

"Yuh'll have to change to another car, sir," the Ranger told him politely.

"You go to Hades," muttered the bleary-eyed passenger.

"*This* car's goin' to Hades, so you'd better take another one," Sonny advised, and the Easterner was hustled back into the rear part of the speeding train.

"*Muy bueno*," the Ranger told the conductor. "Now will yuh lend me yore key to the washroom? Thanks."

"We're about ten miles from Red Rock," said the trainman, nervously looking at his watch. "Anything more I can do, Mr. Tabor?"

"Just see that those three hombres get into *this* coach—and be shore to keep out of the way in case there's shootin'."

"Don't worry, I'm too big a target to take chances," said the beefy conductor with a forced and sickly smile. "Well, good luck, Ranger!"

Sonny Tabor and his uneasy prisoner were alone in the smoker now, and for a while the only sounds were the rhythmic *clickity-click-click* of the rails, the humming of wheels, and the steady panting of the locomotive just ahead.

Outside the car windows the mountains and deserts, ghostly and luminous under the moon, seemed to drift behind the train. Great forests of weirdly branched saguaros filled the dark hollows of the volcanic landscape, alternating with sinister groves of glistening cholla, the devil cactus. Soon, on the left side of the train, Sentinel Peak hove into view, a great, isolated pyramid that blotted out the stars. The appearance of this landmark so close at hand meant that they were nearing Red Rock.

The escaping bandits were crafty. The tiny town of Red Rock was out of Sheriff Westcott's jurisdiction, being just over the line in Pinal County. They had waited, secure in the Catalina Mountains, until the posses had given up the chase, and now they meant to skip Arizona for keeps.

And except for Yancy's slip-up in Tucson they would have succeeded, without anyone being the wiser. They had plotted just one murder too many.

"Come on, Yancy, I'm lockin' yuh in the toilet," Sonny drawled. "I don't want yuh singin' out any warnin' to those rattlesnakes when they come into the car. And I'll change hats with yuh, hombre."

"I hope the boys blow the hell out of yuh, Tabor!" Yancy snarled as Sonny pushed him into the compartment at the end of the car and turned the key in the lock.

With Yancy's Stetson on his head —it was a black one with a conspicuous band of small silver conchas— the Ranger slumped carelessly into a seat at the front of the car with his back to the engine. From this spot he would have a good view of anyone entering the smoker.

Sonny loosened his gun belts slightly. His pulses had taken on a quicker beat, and he took a few deep breaths. There was no bravado in his make-up; he was a little afraid, and honest enough to admit it to himself. He didn't fear death, but he dreaded the possibility of

failure. He was thinking of the promise that he'd made to Mrs. Scott, and of what would happen to her and to her sons if things went wrong.

The train was slowing down and the brakes were grinding jerkily. Out in the vestibule he heard a trainman call:

"Red Rock! Red Rock!"

CHAPTER VI.

THREE TICKETS TO ETERNITY.

SINCE about nine o'clock a trio of strangers had been loitering about the small, yellow-painted depot in Red Rock. They had a quart bottle of whiskey with them, but, although they had taken frequent pulls at it, they were far from being intoxicated. For a while the men had whiled away the time by playing seven-up on one of the seats in the diminutive waiting room, ignoring the "No Smoking" sign. Tiring of this, they began pacing up and down the cindery platform alongside the tracks.

"That hombre in the depot says the train's on time," growled Mink Faber. "We ought to be seein' the headlight of that puddle-jumper mighty soon."

He was the smallest of the three desperadoes, and moved with a stealthy, slinking grace. Sleek and dark, he had pointed, undersized features and eye as black and malignant as a Gila monster's. He was wearing expensive chaparajos and fancy-stitched boots, and the gun that cuddled his right thigh had a handle of mother of pearl.

The three killers seated themselves on the baggage cart in front of the station. Their own luggage, a battered yellow suitcase and two canvas war bags, was piled upon it, for they had checked it through to their destination. All was in readiness, and they eagerly watched the starlit sky to the southeast.

Each of them was the possessor of a long, green ticket reading "Los Angeles, California." Each of them had about eighteen thousand dollars in bank notes. No wonder they were in good humor!

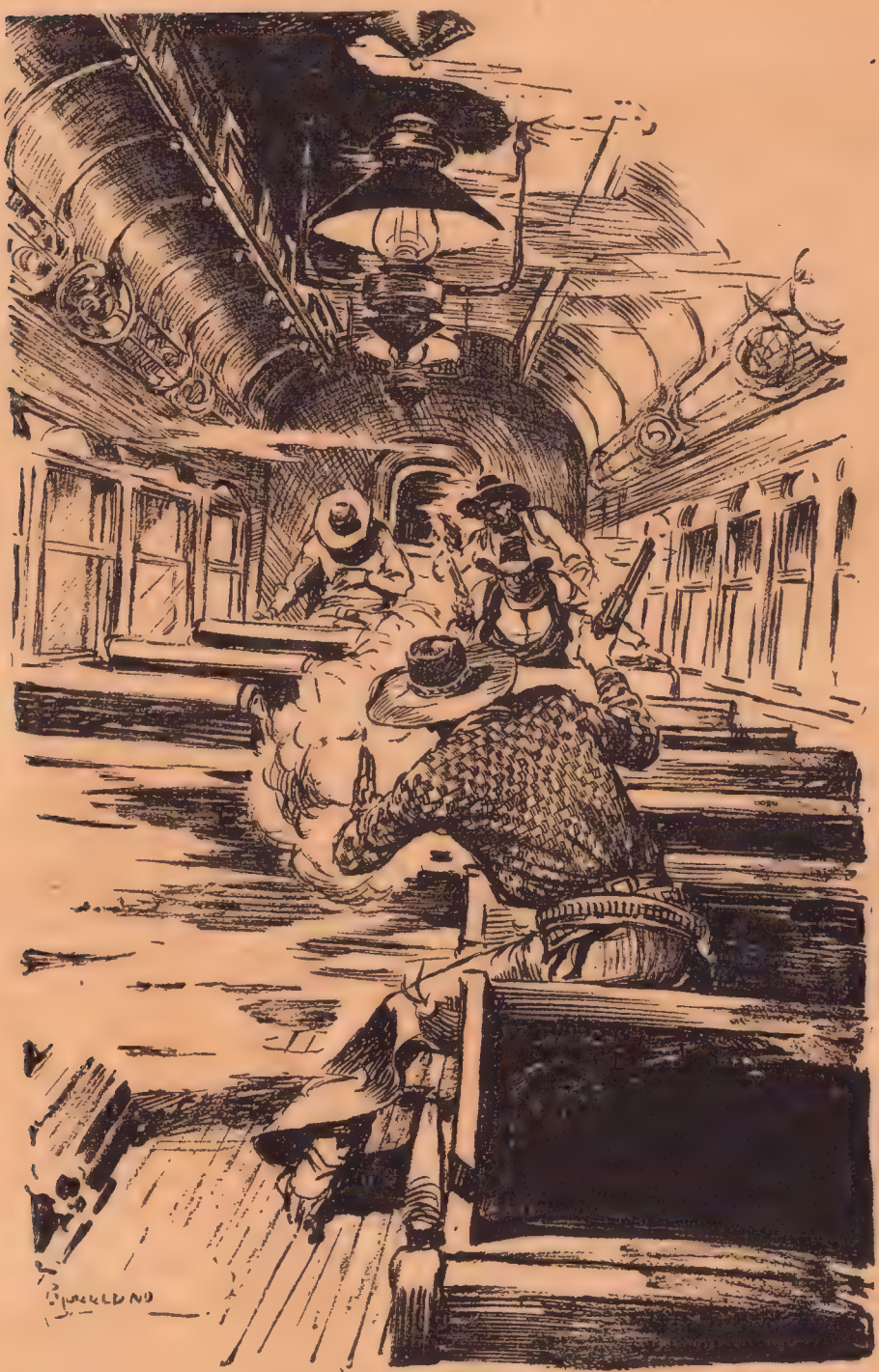
"Well, by this time tomorrow," Hogue laughed, "we'll be bellyin' up to the bar in Californy. My luck has changed, and I'm goin' to ride high, wide, an' handsome. I'll bust every faro bank on the coast."

"It's Frisco fer me," Pete Nylander shrugged. "Oaksford is goin' to meet me thar in a few weeks. We aim to open a gamblin' house of our own. I'm takin' good care of what I made in that haul."

Blacky Hogue was a hulking, broken-nosed hombre dressed in slovenly range clothes. His yellow shirt was filthy and spotted with grease, and his flat, revolting face was badly in need of soap, water, and razor. He was a southpaw, and wore his gun on the left hip.

Nylander was clad in "store clothes" except for his wide hat and the tall-heeled boots he wore under his pants legs. He was a huge, rawboned hombre and his suit of shiny blue serge seemed too small for him. Under his coat, which was unbuttoned, the straps of a shoulder harness could be seen, the support for the holstered Colt that was snuggled under his left armpit. He carried another weapon on his hip, and of the three bandits he was perhaps the most to be feared. He had a fiery red face, yellow hair, and a low, sloping forehead that spoke of stupidity and animal ferocity.

"We shore made a monkey out of the shuriff," Mink Faber sniggered.



His big, blue Colts came leaping from the leather, crashing flame and smoke.

"And by the way, I wonder how Yancy made out."

"He'll be on the train, all right," said Nylander, showing his stained and broken teeth. "Fer my part, I think it was a good idea of Oaksford's in more way than one. With the Scott kid out of it, our shares run bigger."

"Here comes the train," said Faber, lighting up a tailor-made cigarette. A hoarse, far off whistle had moaned on the horizon and they saw the glimmer of the headlight. Nylander took a final swig of whiskey and hurled the empty bottle across the tracks.

In a few minutes the locomotive came sliding slowly past the little depot, hissing and rumbling to a stop just beyond. The brakeman hurriedly threw down the portable step, shouting, " 'Board!" The night train never halted at Red Rock for more than a minute or so.

"Yancy's in the smoker, sittin' in thar by hisself," grunted Blacky Hogue. "Come on, fellers."

He was the first up the steps, and at his heels was Mink Faber, with Nylander clambering clumsily in the rear. They entered the vestibule, turned sharply and entered the smoker. The glare of the overhead lamps fell directly on their hard, self-satisfied faces as they started up the passageway between the two rows of empty seats. The train had started with a jerk and was already gathering speed.

"How'ya, Yancy!" Hogue called.

The black Stetson with the silver-decorated band had been slanted forward, as if the wearer had been dozing. But now, as Hogue spoke, it tilted back. The hombre who wore it rose quietly, stepped into the aisle, and then for the first time the three bandits realized that this man wasn't their crony. It was somebody else, a coldly smiling blue-eyed youth, a stranger.

"My name is Tabor," he was saying slowly and easily. "I'm an Arizona Ranger, and you three men are under arrest for armed robbery and murder. Put up yore hands."

Several seconds ticked away, instants that seemed centuries long to the four taut men inside the swaying railway car. It was a bitter shock for the trio of "successful" murderers. They were trained gunmen, however, professional trigger men, and they didn't intend to surrender to a lone officer! Hogue, who was less than ten feet from the Ranger, drove his swift left hand to the butt of his Colt.

"Blow 'im apart!" he screeched.

Until Hogue gave him the cue, Sonny Tabor had made no move to draw his gun, but now his big, blue Colts came leaping from the leather, crashing flame and smoke! His double draw was blindingly fast—a blur —then quick, winking flame.

The coach was a "smoking car" now in deadly earnest! A blue powder fog, pierced by lashing streamers of orange-red fire, dimmed the swaying lamps. The roar of gunfire that swept through the car was like the pounding of mighty hammers, and with the heavier thunder came the sickening impacts of lead upon human flesh and the vicious whine of slugs gone wild.

Blacky Hogue failed to get in a shot. His gun exploded, but the bullet tore into the floor of the car. The first thunder blast from Tabor's .45s had sent a brace of slugs ripping through the front of his yellow shirt and into the evil heart behind it. The impact lifted him from his feet and he seemed to be doing a grotesque dance before he finally went sprawling, headfirst, and landed almost at the Ranger's feet. Although the life

was already leaving his hulking body his left hand twitched as if still yanking a trigger.

Mink Faber was the next in Sonny Tabor's line of fire, but Nylander had been quicker on the draw. One of the big hombre's guns was already in action and he was clawing the other from his shoulder holster.

Faber yelled something, but his words were blotted out by the increasing thunder of the Colts. Sonny had moved quickly to one side and his big single-actions were spitting over the top of one of the car seats. He knew, now, that this would be a fight to the death. He'd have to drop these killers or be mercilessly slain himself. He'd already felt the burn of a bullet as a slug from Nylander skimmed his shoulder. The air of the coach was dense and pungent now with thickening clouds and jets of hot smoke. The window opposite Sonny went out with an angry crash.

The Ranger wasted little time on the two remaining killers. They'd had their chance to surrender, they'd refused, and no more pity could be extended to them than a pair of mad dogs. Mink Faber was hit and went down on one knee, clutching at the edge of a seat. His twisted mouth was oozing scarlet, but he still kept his grip on his pearl-handled gun and Sonny was forced to shoot him again. He went down, this time, in death.

Nylander had a gun in each hand, but was finding his ex-outlaw antagonist difficult to put down! And the seconds in which he had to do it were numbered and fleeting. There was a look of fear, of panic, on his hatchet face now and he was stepping backward, trying vainly to make a getaway from this relentless, fast-shooting Ranger. He didn't quite make it to the vestibule between the cars.

He got it between the buttons of his "store" coat and flopped into the aisle as heavily as a stunned steer.

The leaden hurricane was over. Only the grinding of the wheels was to be heard now in the gently swaying death coach. Sonny Tabor took a deep breath, then holstered his guns, went to the broken window and leaned out for a few moments to fill his powder-stung lungs with the fresh air of the desert night. Three men had died while the train had been passing between two mileposts.

Several minutes passed before the pale-faced, panting conductor ventured back into the smoker, peering gingerly from the vestibule before entering, and sighing with relief at the sight of Sonny Tabor.

"Good grief, man!" he gasped, staring with widening eyes at the silent figures on the floor. "You don't mean—you got 'em all?"

"I seem to have had the breaks," Tabor said grimly. "I want these men unloaded at the next station. Can I get a train back to Tucson there tonight?"

"An eastbound freight will be headed through at three twenty this morning," the trainman gulped. "Gosh, son—"

He was still too amazed to say much. The Ranger now unlocked the washroom door. He got a none-too-pleasant surprise. The window was open and Yancy was gone. The prisoner had jumped from the train, handcuffs and all, and, unless he was lying injured somewhere along the track, he had made a perfect getaway.

"I reckon I've got plenty to learn about this law officer's business," Sonny admitted ruefully.

CHAPTER VII.

LITTLE PINE CANYON.

SONNY TABOR left the passenger train—and had the bodies of the three dead bandits unloaded—at a little station called Wymota, where there was a siding. The freight came puffing in on schedule in the early hours of the morning, and after some delay the slain desperadoes were put aboard the caboose—much to the open-mouthed bewilderment of the train crew.

While waiting for the freight, Sonny had borrowed a horse and gone back up the track in search of the escaped Yancy. He saw no sign of him, however, and in the darkness he was unable to find the spot where he'd jumped off. There was plenty of sand along the tracks and the chances were that Yancy hadn't been much injured.

It was just getting daylight when the train reached Tucson, where Sonny superintended removing Nylander, Hogue, and Faber from the caboose to the baggage room of the depot. Sonny, of course, had taken the loot.

"But . . . but wh-what'll I do with these spooky-lookin' things?" stuttered the station agent, scratching his green-visored head in perplexity and horror.

"Send 'em to Sheriff Westcott—with Ranger Tabor's compliments," Sonny replied cheerfully, and he went to the livery barn to reclaim Paint. Yancy's bronc was still in its stall, but the Ranger had a hunch that the bandit had stolen one—perhaps a relay of them—during the night.

"He's prob'ly miles from here," he muttered. "Well—I'll see what I can do about capturin' that Oaksford hombre. I hope he hasn't flown his coop, too."

Before leaving town he wrote a brief note to Dr. Francisco Fernandez and sent a Mexican boy with it to the medico's office. He thought of seeing Mrs. Scott, too, but decided against it. After all, her son, Frank, was still in jail, and there wasn't much, yet, that he could say to relieve her mind.

It was good to be back in the saddle again, riding into the crisp air of the morning, and Paint seemed to enjoy it, too. The quick-stepping little pinto cayuse was fairly dancing as Sonny turned its head toward the great, forested range of mountains—the Catalinas—that towered high above the town on the north. They were deep purple, except where the sun reddened their rocky battlements, and a wisp of cloud hung around the summit of Mount Lemmon as they crossed the last arroyo and climbed the last foothill at their base.

"I'd like to see the sheriff's face when those bodies are delivered," the ex-outlaw chuckled. "But maybe—the next dead hombre he'll be seein' will be *me*."

They were soon out of the mesquite and creosote-scented desert land and among the trees, where Sonny followed a canyon that had been familiar to him since his days as a hunted fugitive. A few miles more and it would branch into the lonely and rocky Little Pine where, he hoped, he would find the Oaksford gang's hideaway. His job was still a formidable one and far from being complete.

At midmorning he came to a small, sweet spring, and he took advantage of this to eat a belated meal of jerky and biscuits that he'd brought in his saddle pocket. He rested in the shade for a little while, while Paint cropped an occasional tuft of grass. In spite of the increas-

ing altitude, it was becoming warmer now.

Entering Little Pine Canyon he slowed his pace, partly to save Paint, for the going was steep, and partly because he knew he'd need to use the utmost caution. It was here that his outlaw "savvy" became of help. For all he knew, he was being watched by an unseen eye from above, and, not wanting to stop an unexpected Winchester slug, he moved with caution, keeping to the deeper brush. Not the scampering of a lizard, not the rise of a bird escaped his instant notice.

He came upon the shack suddenly. Almost before he realized it he was within fifty yards of the place. It was well hidden from any but a practiced eye, but it was larger and better built than he'd expected. Judging from its appearance, it had been there for many months, for the logs and boards were weathered. The sheriff's posse hadn't been very efficient or it would have found and investigated this suspicious-looking place.

On the other side was a corral, but the Ranger couldn't see whether it contained horse or not. Nor could he be sure whether anyone was inside the shanty.

He dismounted noiselessly, left Paint, with a reassuring pat, in the concealing brush, then started on foot for the bandit lair. He moved warily, but without hesitation, taking care to avoid being in line with its single, grimy window. The slab door, he saw, was partly ajar.

There was someone there! He heard a peculiar rasping sound, as if steel was rubbing against steel.

He quickened his step, but his guns still nestled snugly in their holsters.

Tabor had been accused of having no nerves at all, because he was always so icily cool when facing death in blazing violence. This wasn't exactly so—he had only trained himself as a poker player trains. He knew the feeling of fear well enough! But he knew, too, that if he allowed his hands to shake or falter—

Kicking the door wide, he stepped boldly into the shack.

Bending over a table, on opposite sides of it, were two men. One, undoubtedly, was Jack Oaksford. And the other hombre was Yancy! Oaksford was working at Yancy's handcuffs with a file!

"Don't bother, gents, I've got a key to those bracelets," Sonny said in an ironically pleasant tone.

Yancy didn't seem to have been hurt much by his leap from the passenger train, though his shirt and his chaparajos were ripped to tatters and begrimed with dirt and perspiration.

He stared stupidly at the blue-eyed officer, his evil mouth open to its fullest extent. His expression would have been laughable had the circumstances been less grim.

"Hell's fire! It's Tabor! The Ranger!" Yancy yammered at last. "Drop him quick!"

Sonny saw no gun belt on Oaksford, but on the table within reach was a double-barreled shotgun, a sawed-off, and the hammers were back at full cock.

"I wouldn't advise yuh to touch that cannon, yuh skunkaroo," the Ranger drawled, advancing another step or two in the shack's single untidy room.

Oaksford *did* reach for it, cougar-quick and with a yelp of rage and hatred. He was a tall hombre, lean and gaunt, with a granite-hard face and poisonous black eyes.

An explosion jarred the flimsy shanty and there was a blinding gust of hot smoke. Oaksford staggered

back, screeching with agony. It had been Ranger Tabor who had fired, and the heavy slug had smashed through the flesh and bone of the bandit's upper arm. Oaksford lost all interest in shotguns! Sonny Tabor's draw had been too fast and smooth for the eye to catch—and his bullet had gone just where he'd meant it to go!

"I'd rather take live ones than dead ones, when it's possible," said the Ranger dryly. "And it looks like I've got gallows fruit—the brains of the gang and its official executioner! Now don't either of yuh move!"

"Git me to a doctor!" groaned the bandit chief through set teeth.

"First of all, I want yore share of the money yuh got out of the bank job," Sonny reminded him unsympathetically. "I'll bet two bits yuh've got it buried under the floor—in a tin can."

"What makes yuh think he has?" Yancy snarled.

Sonny nodded toward some large spots of tallow on the table edge. "Yuh sealed the can with candle grease to keep the banknotes from the wet," he said grimly. "Now the quicker yuh tell me where it is, Oaksford, the quicker yuh'll get to the doctor. Or do I have to tear up the whole floor?"

"All right, you devil!" Oaksford moaned. "You win, I reckon. It's under the boards in the corner thar."

Yancy swore disgustedly. "Didn't I tell yuh, Jack, thet Tabor wasn't human?"

The money, consisting of bank notes and gold coins, was in a gallon tin can buried a foot deep under the floor at the place Oaksford had pointed out. The Ranger took charge of this, feeling fairly satisfied. He handcuffed Yancy and the cursing Oaksford together—the work with the file had just been started, evidently, for the heavy link was still intact. Then he put his prisoners on one of the broncs that he found in the corral and made ready to start for town.

CHAPTER VIII.

A JOLT FOR THE SHERIFF.

SHERIFF WALT WESTCOTT had been in a state of stunned stupefaction all day and his deputy, the usually cocksure Rushton, was almost prostrated. The former was pacing his office floor and chewing savagely on a cigar that had long since gone out. The deputy was brooding at his desk in the corner, from time to time scratching confusedly at his head. He had never been so bewildered.

"Damned if *I* savvy it, Walt," he growled.

"Here I get a present o' three dead men—three hombres nobody seems to have ever seen before—and with the best regards of thet Tabor kid!" fumed the sheriff. "Must be three o' the bank robbers, but how we *know* they are? How did *Tabor* know? Say, do yuh reckon thet ex-outlaw would simply blast the first three hombres he came to and pawn 'em off as—"

"No, I don't think he'd do thet, hardly," Rushton answered, sighing. "But he seems to have made fools out of us, anyhow!"

"Go bring thet bank teller out of the cells ag'in!" the sheriff roared.

Rushton rose obediently, took his keys from his desk and disappeared down the hallway. He returned in a few minutes with Frank Scott in tow. The teller was white and haggard and his face was creased by lines of worry.

The sheriff led him to the far corner of the office and jerked the blan-

ket from the three huddled figures that lay sprawled beneath it.

"Look hard now fer the third time, Scott!" he bellowed. "Do yuh reco'nize these hombres? Ain't they cronies of yores? Are they some of the bank robbers?"

"They may be the bank robbers, but they're not cronies of mine," said Scott wearily. "I told you a dozen times, sheriff, that I'm not guilty of the charge you've got against me! These men seem to be about the same size and build as three of the bandits, but they were masked. I can't positively identify them."

"I think we're *all* goin' loco!" growled the deputy. "Hold on, by jings! Wait a minute, or are my eyes afoolin'! Here comes somethin' thet might explain a few things!"

He was staring toward the street where a strange little cavalcade had halted at the hitch rail in front of the office. On the pinto was Ranger Sonny Tabor and on another were two scowling, manacled men.

The beefy sheriff and his tall deputy looked on in amazed silence while Tabor marched his surly prisoners in. Frank Scott was just as perplexed.

"*Buenas tardes,* sheriff," was the bullet-dimpled Ranger's polite greeting.

"Do . . . do yuh mind tellin' me what this is all about?" Sheriff Westcott asked, gulping. "Who is *these* two customers? And who is the three cooled ones yuh sent to me this mornin'?"

"I'll introduce yuh," Sonny Tabor laughed grimly. "The dead hombres are Nylander, Hogue, and Faber, if I've been informed correctly, sheriff. And these two are Yancy and Oaksford, who are plumb ready to be locked up. They were all members of the outfit that stuck up the bank the other day."

"Yuh . . . yuh got all five of the skunks? By yoreself?" the sheriff almost screamed. "How did yuh do it?"

Sonny smiled. There were six hombres in the mess, but he didn't intend to tell Westcott about the sixth man just yet.

"Pardon me, sheriff, but if yuh'd keep yore saddle as warm as yuh do yore swivel chair yuh'd prob'ly have better luck," he drawled. "Here's the stolen dinero. The gang haven't had time to do much spendin' and I think yuh'll find it all here."

From his pockets Sonny unloaded several bulging packages. He broke them all open, one by one, and the resulting pile of gold and currency covered the entire top of Westcott's desk.

A change had come over the sheriff's round, fat face. It was his turn now to do a little suffering, and he was certainly wincing. He was being amply repaid for his bitter words to Tabor on the day before.

"Now, sheriff, I want you to release Frank Scott," said Tabor earnestly. "He had nothing whatever to do with the holdup. I know, and yuh have my word for it."

"Why . . . why, shorely, if yuh say so, Ranger," Westcott stammered, and he was very red and shamed. "Yuh're at liberty to go, Mr. Scott, an' I . . . I'm sorry I made the mistake. Hope yuh'll overlook it, but I really done what I thought was right."

"I'm sure of it, sheriff," said the bank teller, but he wasn't paying much attention—he was looking confusedly at Sonny Tabor.

Sonny was sorry at the sheriff's discomfiture. "No hard feelin's, anywhere," he said. "And this office can split the credit, whatever it is, with the Arizona Rangers."

Sheriff Westcott brightened up at

this chance to save his reputation. If Sonny hadn't offered to be so generous he would have been the laughingstock of the county, and he knew it. He stretched out his plump paw and grasped the Ranger's.

"I was wrong about yuh, Sonny!" he admitted. "I was wrong, and I ain't above confessin' so. And I'm eatin' my words when I told yuh off yisterday. Yore past as a—an outlaw—well, it'll never mean nothin' to me from now on! I'm proud an' glad to call yuh a friend!"

"Same goes fer me," piped up the deputy feebly, and he, too, took the Ranger's gladly given hand.

As the steel door of the jail cells clanged sullenly behind Oaksford and Yancy the Arizona Ranger left the office—with Frank Scott. He had promised to see Westcott about the bank case in the near future.

"Frank," he told the still-worried teller when they were out of hearing of the local lawmen, "I know about yore brother, Jim. All about him."

The bank official clutched nervously at Sonny's arm. "I . . . I was afraid! I mean, I thought you did." His voice was shaken and anxious. "What do you intend to do—about Jim? Those two bandits that you just arrested will tell all they know, and where Jim is."

"They won't, because they savvy that yore brother's evidence would help hang them," Sonny explained. "Besides, they don't know where Jim is. I had the medico move him to a safer place this mornin'. But understand this," he added, when the banker began thanking him, "as a Ranger I've taken an oath to uphold the law, and Jim really was concerned in that stick-up."

"Yes, I . . . I see that he will have to pay the consequences," Frank Scott sighed. "But he's suffered for his terrible mistake, and if he had a break—"

"It's what he's goin' to get," said Sonny Tabor, smiling, and the old bullet scar in his cheek looked more than ever like a boyish dimple. "I'll have to talk his case over with Captain Moffat of the Rangers, but I think I can promise yuh that if Jim testifies against Yancy and Oaksford he'll get off with a short term in prison, at the most. Those other hombres are killers, hardened criminals, and they'll hang!"

Frank Scott choked up a little at this piece of good news. "Thanks—Ranger!" he blurted.

"He'll be out of sight until his wound heals and he's strong again," Tabor told him. "And that will give yuh time to break the news gently to yore mother."

"You . . . you've thought of everything," said the bank teller. "And being as you spoke of mother, Ranger, will you come and have supper tonight with her and me?"

Sonny Tabor considered for a moment, and then his bronzed face crinkled with a smile.

"If that includes a feed for my Paint bronc," he chuckled, "my answer's yes!"

Ranger Sonny Tabor has traveled the lonely outlaw trails himself, and knows that a man may sometimes live down his owl-hoot past. Tabor always fights for justice. There'll be another thrilling, fast-action story about him soon.

TOO HOT FOR HOSS THIEVES

By Stephen Payne

It was a six-gun card game—an' Pole Pickett's partner was the dummy.

THIS Bear Track George was a horse thief. Only I didn't know it when me and him fell in together, aridin' out from town to the Tumblin' K where we'd both heard K. Archer and his foreman, Skag Sivers, was takin' on hands for the fall roundup.

Bear Track, thickset, swarthy and crooked-nosed, sat his nag like a real

cowpuncher, and I sure figured I was one lucky kid to be with him. For if it looked to Skag Sivers like me and Bear Track was pards, he'd ought to give both of us ridin' jobs!

Up till now, just heaps of foremen and wagon bosses and ranch owners had showed an amazin' lack of interest in hirin' yores truly, Pole Pickett of the Oregon pioneer Picketts. Course I've come a long ways since I left home to be a cowpuncher. I've busted some broncs, learned how to rope, and got lots more cow and horse savvy than them ranchers ever seem to figure possible. Maybe my looks is against me, for I growed up awful tall and long-legged, not widenin' out to match, and though I ain't raisin' no beard yet, my red hair always does need cuttin'.

But I didn't tell Bear Track why I hadn't got barbered in town, nor tell him I hadn't et supper nor breakfast, neither one. The reason bein' as how my new saddle horse, Flash, had got a lameness in his left shoulder. So I'd seen a vet and the vet took my very last nickel for giving me his opinion and a bottle of dope he mixed up. He called this stuff "Blister," sayin' it was gosh-awful powerful and to rub it on Flash's shoulder with a brush or a corn cob, 'cause it'd burn a man's hand fierce.

Bear Track George was talkin' steady as we jogged across the rollin' brown hills with the aspen groves lookin' undressed, 'cause this was fall, and winter not far off. Yet I didn't put him down as just a windbag, 'cause his yarns seemed sorta reasonable. Like the one when he was carryin' a pay roll and six outlaws ambushed him.

Said Bear Track: "I saved my hide by playin' dead. Kid, I reckon that was the hardest thing a man ever had to do. I was wounded some, but conscious, and layin' on my face when them toughs searched my clothes. I didn't dast wiggle a muscle or even breathe, or they'd have knowed I was still alive."

'Twas evenin' when we hit the Tumblin' K, layin' in a wide valley all brown like the rest of the country, 'cept for the sage and for them swell old mountains in the background.

The rannies had finished work and was cleanin' up or packin' their war bags. They held back on hoorawin' me, too, because they savvied right off as Bear Track was a puncher who knowed his stuff. So did that long-eared, horse-faced Skag Sivers. He said to my new friend:

"Shore, I'll cut you a string and give you forty a month."

I waited for Bear Track to put in a word 'bout me. But did that hombre let me down! I stopped likin' him right then when he said: "This kid with me's a top-hand chore boy!" Skag run his gray eyes up and down me, and drawled, "Happens we need a chore boy to batch here on the place while we're gone. You're on, Redhead."

I looked down my long nose, and I would have rode off only a Pickett axiom came to mind: "Any job with three squares a day is better than no grub and no pay."

So I said, "Jake!" and was glad I had when we sat down to supper. There was fried chicken as well as everything else cowboys like. The Tumblin' K had a swelligant cook. All the more reason for me to get on steady with such an outfit.

Right after that meal, them rollicky rannies pulled off a trick on me I hadn't met up with afore. It seems Bear Track had told 'em I

was broke, so Breezy and Shorty and Slim and Happy had took up a collection. I could make ten bones if I'd ride a certain horse and ride him clean.

I jumped at the chance for to show 'em I could ride. Maybe then Skag'd change his mind 'bout me as a cowpuncher. Ten dollars would help me out a heap, too, when I was needin' winter clothes awful bad.

Night was comin' fast, so the boys hustled up the show. This Hornet horse could buck like the dickens, as I found out. I took a fierce joltin' and was half off him three or four time afore he quit. Yet I never touched leather!

"You win, Pole," hollered Breezy. "Here's your ten bones." He handed me somethin' wrapped in paper.

There was a sudden complete silence. K. Archer himself and all the crew watched me as I unwrapped the little package, expectin' a sheaf of one-dollar bills. Outta the paper fell ten well-picked chicken bones!

I froze stiff, starin' at 'em. Then all the waddies busted loose, yippin', whoopin', jeerin'.

"Pole Bones Pickett! Bones Pole Pickett! We told him he'd get ten bones for makin' the ride—and ten bones is just what he got!"

They kept hoorawin' me till we hit the hay. But come daybreak they was too busy to start in on me again. Breakfast over, the roundup outfit hit the trail, takin' only half the whoppin' big Tumblin' K cavvy with 'em and leavin' the rest at the ranch so as to have fresh mounts later on.

Watchin' 'em go, I had trouble with my eyes; trouble keepin' my lower jaw pulled up, too. The boss, K. Archer, sure noticed it.

"Kinda gets you, eh, Button?" he said. "'Spect you'd like to go along."

"Would I!" was all I could answer.

The big boss gave me a look like he savvied how I felt, remarkin': "Waal, you couldn't hardly hold your end with that salty outfit o' riders."

He then told me all the things I was to do 'round the ranch, and afterward rode off to town, sayin' for me to expect him back home when I seen him.

Even though I had heaps to do, I never seen a more lonesome place than the ol' Tumblin' K for the next couple of days. I nigh got myself crippled, too, 'cause I rubbed some of that vet's dope on Flash's shoulder with a little brush. Afore I knowed what was up, that horse o' mine went plumb hog-wild. Pretty near bit me, and did kick me outta the stall.

That horse o' mine went plumb hog-wild!

Mornin's and evenin's was mighty cold. So I rummaged through the bunkhouse, and found another pair

of overalls to put on the top of them I had, also a ragged sweater and old blue jumper.

Noon of the third day I sighted a rider comin'. But it wasn't K. Archer. 'Twas my pal—my one-time pal who'd let me down and I no longer liked—Bear Track George. That he was forkin' his own saddler I didn't think was funny, since he had taken it along with the roundup cavvy.

I said to him: "Oh, it's you!" unenthusiastic.

He laughed shortlike, and answered: "Don't be an ol' sore-head, kid. After all, it was me who got you this job."

"Uh? If you call *this* a job? What brung you home?"

Bear Track said he had come to take the rest of the cavvy—fifty-odd horses—to the roundup. Foreman Skag had hired some new punchers, he said, and wanted all the horses.

I figured that was all on the level, so I saddle Flash, and helped Bear Track get the cavvy started north along the trail through the rough hills. Right soon Bear Track said I should turn back and 'tend to my work. I turned back, but inside me was just one big ache to go to the roundup.

Since I couldn't go, I decided I'd keep the cavvy in sight as long as I could. That was how come I climbed up on a hill where the leafless aspens grew thick, and seen somethin' I wasn't supposed to see.

Bear Track had met with three more riders. One of 'em I recognized even at half a mile. He was ol' K. Archer, with his horse bein' led by another hombre. Archer didn't act right; didn't ride like he ought to. Soon I made out why. He was tied to his saddle!

Nor was this all! Bear Track and the two other hombres was now headin' the cavvy due west toward a low pass in the high mountains! 'Twas up to me, alone, to save the boss and them horses. Luckily, I had my six-gun along and maybe a dozen shells for it. I hadn't had dough to buy more.

I fuzzed Flash across the nearer hills, and got to the canyon which led to the pass ahead of Bear Track George and his pards. Ridin' up the canyon I kept lookin' for the right kind of set-up where I could stop them thieves.

At last I come to a narrow gap, with a straight rock wall to the left and a rock slide to the right. If I could get up on the knife-blade side above that slide I could maybe start it rollin' once again and block the gap. But a feller couldn't climb up that slide.

On around a turn I rode and saw how I could make the climb all right from this farther side. So I left Flash hid in some jack pines and got to the top of the ridge above the slide all hunky. Up there was huge big boulders, a reg'lar wall of 'em, and behind 'em, on the side away from the gap, grew some scrubby pines. Also lots of this rank, tall-growin' wild rye.

I quick found out I couldn't jar none of them big rocks loose. Some small ones that were loose I did roll down, doin' no good though, for they didn't start the old rock slide to rollin' and zoomin' down into the gap.

I was still workin' away, sweatin' my boots full, when up the gap came the cavvy. One hombre, ridin' ahead of 'em, seen me. He cut loose with his six-gun. Bullets whizzin' all 'round me, I dived back behind the big boulders, snaked out my own lead chucker, done some shootin'

myself. My shots was heaps wilder'n that horse thief's.

Mighty soon the cavvy was stopped, one man stayin' behind 'em with K. Archer, while Bear Track and the third hombre began to smoke me up. Their lead whistled and snarled and hit rocks. Yet they couldn't hit me—if I stayed hid. Neither could I hit them.

My shells was goin' fast—too fast. I'd soon be out. Soon it would be dark. Then Bear Track and his pards would slip on up the gap, up to where they could climb the ridge. They'd get behind me. Get me!

After that, there'd be nobody to stop them thieves nor help K. Archer. Bear Track's pals must have run into the boss and grabbed him as he was ridin' back from town. Doin' some desperate thinkin' while the thieves' bullets pelted my rock front, I remembered Bear Track's tellin' me he'd once saved his hide by playin' dead.

Maybe—maybe I could fool him! Usin' sticks, some string I had in my pockets, and my extra pair of overalls, my jumper and my hat, I made a dummy by stuffin' the jumper, overalls and hat with tall, rank wild rye grass.

Next, I fired my last shell at Bear Track to turn him back from ridin' farther up the notch. I had the luck to nick that ornery walloper, too. But now I hadn't no cartridges at all. Maybe the others was gettin' short likewise, for Bear Track rode down behind the horses and came back before he and tother hombre began smokin' me up once again with plenty of lead.

All at once I raised the dummy up above the rocks, let out an awful holler, like I'd been hit bad, and then toppled that dummy down the slope. The light was now powerful dim, else them fellers could have seen it plain. Then it wouldn't have fooled 'em atall.

I raised the dummy above the rocks an' let out an awful holler.

Down, down skidded the dummy; me holdin' my breath, scairt stiff it'd fall plumb to the bottom of the slide.

But it didn't! About halfway down, the thing fetched against a bigger'n average boulder. Bear Track and his pard emptied their six-guns into that figure. Then they laughed, mean and harsh.

"Got him at last," rasped Bear Track. "Pore, darned fool greenhorn," he said, contemptuouslike. "Come on with the hosses, Magpie!"

His pard said: "We can be doggoned glad the goof couldn't shoot no better'n he did. Waal, he's dead as a skinned beef now!"

It was too dark for me to see K. Archer's face as the thieves rode on up the gap. I heard 'em get Flash outta the jack pines and didn't like that a little bit. Yet I wasn't through with Bear Track. Not

much. Easin' myself down the slope I'd climbed I nigh broke the bottle of Blister still in one hip pocket. I'd forgot that stuff till right then. I had a notion to throw it away—but I didn't. It might come in useful.

On my own hoofs I took after the Tumblin' K cavvy. Toward ten o'clock I overtook the thieves only because they'd stopped in a wide, open park with a creek and a little cabin in it and jack pines around the edges. They seemed to figure they was pretty safe, though two of 'em was guardin' the horses while the third hombre was makin' supper at a fire in front of the log shanty.

I coyoted in close and made out that K. Archer was inside the cabin. About this time the cook moseyed to the creek to get water for coffee. On the fire was the coffeepot and another pot filled with some kind of stew.

Mighty fast I stole up to the fire and poured half of my bottle of Blister into that stew, givin' the coffee a good shot of it, too. Then I got away from there before the cook started back with his water. I sure wished I'd had time to get the boss loose. But I hadn't dared go in the cabin and get myself in a trap.

The cook put more water in his coffee; then he hollered: "Hot stuff-f!"

Bear Track and Magpie shoved the cavvy up past the cabin, so they'd be able to stop the horses if they took a notion to head for home. Bear Track got to the shack first, but both hombres left their saddle nags standing outside the light of the fire.

With a spoon apiece they dipped into the stew, and though I was busy doin' things to the saddle and bridle on Bear Track's horse, I was watchin' the hombres all the time. I'd hoped all three would sample that stew at the same time, and that the stuff would plain paralyze 'em. But the cook wasn't eatin' yet.

After Magpie downed his spoonful, he let out a kinda strangled yell, jerked up to his feet, grabbed his throat with his right hand, and began to cough, sputter and choke. Bear Track danced a jig, his arms pawin' the air, his swart face all twisted, while he coughed and roared!

If only I'd had loads for my smoker right then! Still the cook, a tough old pill, wasn't in no distress. Even though his pards was kinda helpless, he'd have leaded me.

Firelight shone into the cabin, so that I got a glimpse of ol' K. Archer, with his head lifted, watchin' them two jiggers who was cuttin' capers, gaspin', chokin', coughin'.

Then somethin' happened I hadn't counted on atall. In just a minute, Bear Track and Magpie turned on the cook plumb savage. Though his lower jaw was down, his eyes bugged out, the two didn't notice he was as s'prised as they was.

"Tryin' to pizen us, hey, Skinny?" yapped Bear Track.

"Jus' what I was thinkin'," Magpie howled. "Skinny figgered to pizen us an' get them hosses for hisself."

Skinny's mouth worked, but no words come out of it. With one hand Bear Track grabbed him by the throat and shook him.

"If we is pizened, we'll fix you afore we kick out."

His other fist knocked the cook galley west. Then Magpie pounced on Skinny, belted him a few good ones, and hogtied him.

Into the shanty the two hombres dragged their cook-pal. Comin' out

again, they smelled of the stew, saying it stunk like nothin' they'd ever smelt. They knowed the cold boiled beef and the canned tomatoes they'd brought with 'em had been all right. It couldn't have been nobody but Skinny who had pizened the mixture!

Flat on the ground in the dark, only my red head lifted, I was hopin' they'd sample the coffee. But they didn't. Bear Track growled:

"Find us somethin' else to chaw on, Magpie. I'll look after the hosses."

By this time, ol' K. Archer had rolled and wiggled to the cabin door and had propped his head and shoulders up against the frame. So he was able to see what I saw in the next minute.

Bear Track hadn't no more than hit his saddle when his horse plain exploded. That horse let a bawl outta him, bogged his head, went up toward the stars, and lit apitchin' for all he was wuth.

Bear Track set back on his bridle reins, and *pop*—the headstall busted. The horse spit out the bit, and Bear Track, saddle and all, plunged backward over the bronc's rump. That swart hombre, hit the dirt, coastin' right on into the fire.

I wouldn't have minded if his neck had been busted. It wasn't. With ol' K. Archer grinnin' like he was pleased, and Magpie gawpin' openmouthed at him, Bear Track got to his feet. He was clawin' hot coals and ashes outta his hair and mouth and nose, queer gurglin' sounds comin' outta him.

He fumbled around, lookin' for his bridle; found it, dragged both it and his saddle to the fire, looked at 'em.

"Cut!" he barked. "Cut with a knife so they'd bust! The headstall and my off latigo, both of 'em, Magpie!" Bear Track shook the latigo and bridle under his pard's nose.

"Yeh," gulped Magpie, and I never seen a pair of beady eyes stickin' out farther than his.

"You—you double-crossin' snake! You figgered to get me kilt! Yah, when we rid in jus' now, you hung back thar with the saddle hosses two or three minutes. You knifed my latigo, my bridle, put rocks or cactus under my saddle!"

Magpie sorta wheezed, but his words was plain: "You're a liar!"

Socko! Bear Track hit him. Another jiffy and them two was all tangled up together, kickin', bitin', sluggin', rippin' into each other.

Magpie an' Bear Track was bitin', kickin', an' sluggin' each other.

I'd sure have liked to watch that scrap. But I knowed if ever I was goin' to have a chance to best them two horse thieves it was right then. I stepped up to the saddle on Magpie's horse, got his rope ready, dug

in my heels, zipped close past that pair of fighters, dropped my noose around both of 'em and went on.

I dropped my noose around both of 'em.

Around the cabin in a couple of short circles I took them horse thieves lickety-split. Then I quick pulled up and jumped on 'em, findin' 'em not hard to tie. Not hard atall!

I ran over to K. Archer and cut him loose. He just stared at me, his lips workin'. Finally words came:

"But I thought them tough nuts kilt you! You—you mean you outfoxed 'em?"

I shrugged. "Well, what's it look like now, boss? Say, I'll have to be ropin' some saddle horses afore this cavvy takes a notion to drift for home."

"You can rope 'em sure enough," said Archer, gettin' to his feet sorta awful stiff and numblike. "Nor that ain't all you've showed me you can do. I'll say it ain't! But, kid, you're fired."

"Fired!" I took a step back and sat down hard, all the props knocked from under me.

The boss' face was one wide grin. He was speakin' again: "Yeh. I'm firin' you as chore boy o' the Tumblin' K. But I'm hirin' you over again for an honest-to-gosh cowpuncher!"

Pole Pickett uses his head as well as his muscles when he gets into tough spots. And he's one hellion when hombres buck him. Look out for another yarn about him soon.

GUNS OF THE LAUGHING SKULL

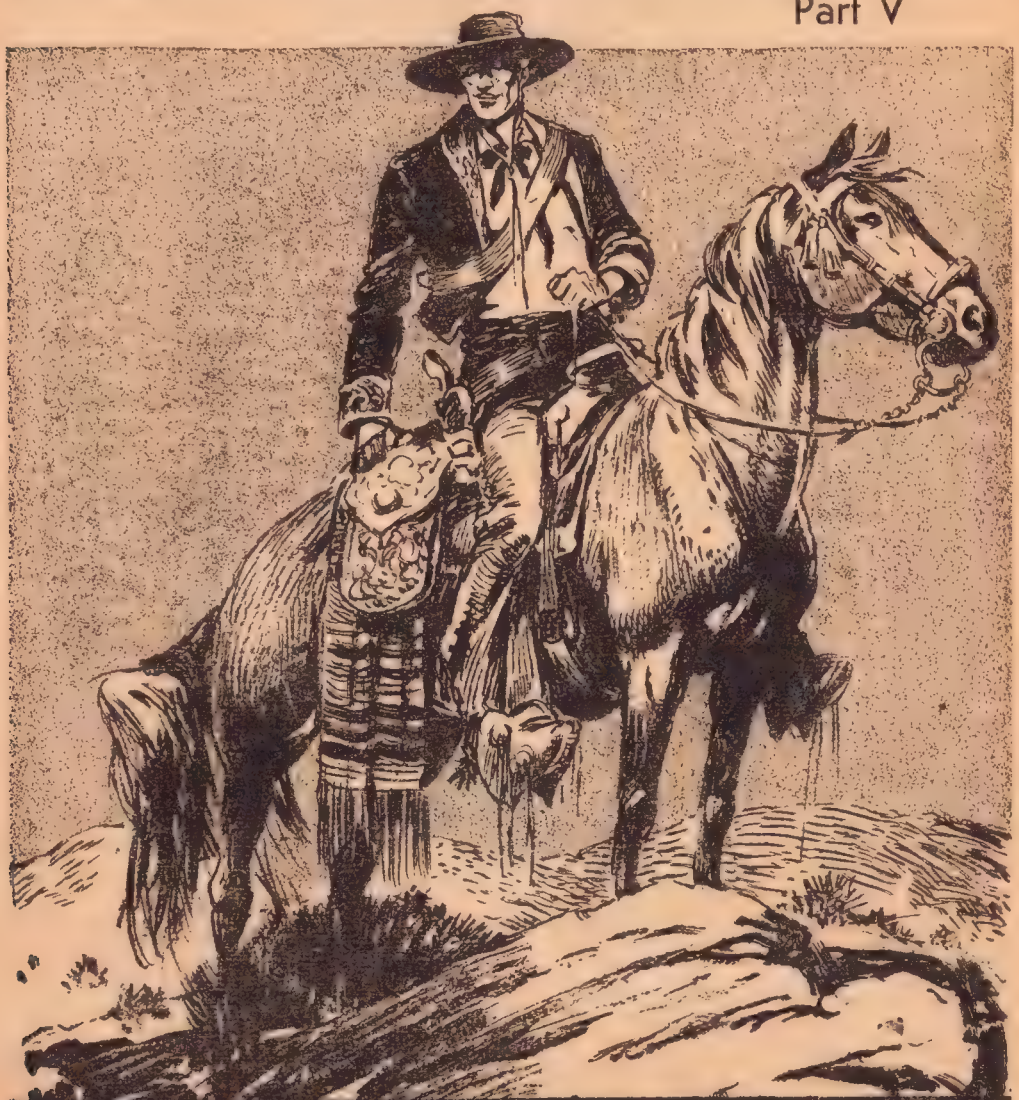
By ED EARL REPP

Weird laughter roared through that canyon of horror and led Ranger Halliday to . . . ?

COMING NEXT WEEK

SENOR DESPERADO

Part V



By WALKER TOMPKINS

Author of "Golden Handcuffs Mean Death," etc.

SEÑOR DESPERADO

Land-grabbers' plots scourged the country with death and terror—and the cruel lash of their cunning drove young Castalina into a vow of outlaw hate.

By Walker Tompkins

The Story So Far:

FREDERICO CASTALINA, son of Don José Castalina who owns the vast Rancho Mariposa in southern California, gets into a fight with

CURD ROCKLER, vicious outlaw who has come West in the early '50s along with a horde of riffraff and gunmen.

Rockler has murdered one of Castalina's hands and robbed him of gold dust. When Castalina accuses Rockler, the outlaw tries to shoot Frederico in the back. He is prevented from doing this by

RAMON CHILENO, a South American, and friend of Frederico, who knifes Rockler's gun arm.

CAPTAIN LEO SPEAR and CORPORAL JACK HARRINGTON of the California Rangers arrest Ramon on Rockler's false testimony.

Frederico goes to Ranger headquarters to free his friend. He meets

GRACE SPEAR, the captain's daughter. He frees Ramon and locks the Rangers in their own jail.

Arriving at Rancho Mariposa, he finds his father worried. All big ranchers in California must produce deeds to their lands or lose them to the new Land Commission. Don José Castalina has lost his deed.

Frederico learns that the missing deed to the Mariposa Ranch may be on file in Monterey. His father sends him to search for it, but Curd Rockler beats Frederico to Monterey, murders the old keeper of records, and destroys the papers.

Rockler and his band of vicious killers get hold of the Rancho Mariposa from the Land Commission and turn the people off it. Don José Castalina dies of a broken heart—for Rockler reported that his son was dead.

When Frederico learns this he vows vengeance against all gringos. As Señor Desperado, he gathers together other Californians who have been driven from their land and forms the Legion of Vengeance. A mysterious masked rider who calls himself El Poncho comes to their hide-out in the Arroyo Seco with a message for Frederico. The message informs Frederico that Rockler plans to drive a herd of Mariposa cattle through Tejon Pass. Señor Desperado and his band swoop down on Rockler's men, but a company of Rangers trap them and Frederico is first to fall from his saddle when the Rangers' guns crash.

El Poncho saves Señor Desperado, who is wounded, but the other members of the Legion of Vengeance are captured. Frederico rides to Los Angeles to save them. He is seen by Curd Rockler and trapped in an alley near Ranger headquarters. Grace Spear rescues him, but Captain Spear, her father, comes in, and Frederico is captured and condemned to be shot by the Rangers on order of United States Judge Fremont. Frederico is led before the firing squad, the guns are raised, and Captain Spear calls out: "Fire!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

MIRACLE IN THE MOONLIGHT.

FOR a spine-tingling moment there was frigid silence in the moonlit compound, broken only by the spectral echo of Captain Leo Spear's final command, ringing back from the adobe walls of the surrounding Ranger barracks.

Señor Desperado, with his shoulder blades pressed against the wall and his eyes squeezed instinctively shut, braced his body against the expected shock of tearing lead.

For the space of a dozen heartbeats, nothing happened. In surprise, Frederico Castalina lifted his lids—and saw an amazing, incredible thing.

The twelve uniformed members of the midnight firing squad suddenly swung their leveled army rifles to the right, as if each gun muzzle had been yanked by a single string.

Captain Spear, his sweat-slick face gleaming in the moonlight, let his jaw sag on a startled oath as he saw that the squad was drawing a bead on him.

"What in blazes is this?" he gasped hoarsely, dropping a hand to the gilded hilt of his cavalry saber. "I gave the order to shoot!"

The uniformed man at the extreme right of the squad rasped out a low, compelling order which made Señor Desperado gasp with amazement, and which struck Spear's senses like a heavy blow:

"*Maños altos, El Capitan!* Lift your arms—or we fire at *you!*"

It was a seeming miracle. Yet Frederico knew that his ears had not deceived him. That order hadn't been given in the voice of any of Captain Spear's Rangers.

It was the voice of Ramon Chileno —the South American vaquero who was second in command of the Legion of Vengeance!

Even as Captain Spear lifted his hands jerkily aloft, the rigid ranks of the firing squad broke, as its members swarmed about the dismayed Ranger, stripping him of saber and belted six-gun before he was aware that disaster had struck.

Señor Desperado lurched forward from the adobe wall, an inquiring grin on his face as he saw Ramon Chileno shove back his Ranger hat so that the moonlight could strike his face.

"Ramon, *hermano!*" cried Frederico, as the two clasped hands. "Is this real? Am I dead, or dreaming —all this?"

Chileno thrust out his chest exultantly.

"No, Frederico mio. You are not dreaming! Your firing squad was composed of fellow bandidos, *si!* And many horses await outside the compound walls, to take us back to Puma Canyon!"

Señor Desperado frowned dazedly. This was impossible—to think that he had been whisked away from the very brink of eternity by a Ranger firing squad that had been transformed as if by a magician's wand into twelve members of his own bandit gang.

"I . . . I don't *sabe!*" panted Castalina. "Miracles do not happen any more! Especially not in this *maltido* city of devils! How did this riddle come to be, Ramon?"

Captain Spear's voice, low-pitched but without a trace of fear in spite of his predicament, cut off Ramon's reply:

"You can't get away with this, Frederico. I don't know how you tricked me, but I have only to shout to bring the entire Ranger garrison swarming out to kill all of you!"

Ramon Chileno laughed softly. The Ranger captain was being held by two sturdy Legionnaires, while the other rifle-toting Californians surrounded him in a compact, menacing ring.

"You would be the first to die if you gave the alarm, El Capitan," reminded the outlaw who was disguised in a Ranger's uniform. "And now, Frederico—what shall we do with El Capitan Spear? Shall we take him to Puma Canyon as a hostage?"

Señor Desperado inhaled deeply. Through what mysterious chain of events he had been rescued by Legionnaires who wore official Ranger uniforms, he could not fathom. But he knew that every moment they lingered here would be filled with peril.

Then, remembering the nineteen fellow Legionnaires who were being held prisoner across this very compound ever since their capture at Tejon Pass, Señor Desperado decided to spring a bluff on the panting Ranger captain before him:

"I will make a bargain with you, El Capitan. Your life is in my hands. But I will spare you—if you will unlock the door of the jail where my Legion brothers are being held captive. If you refuse—then I may have to run your own sword through your heart, *si*."

Spear's face glistened with clammy perspiration. He writhed in the skin-crushing grips of his captors, but his eyes were unafraid.

"I don't make bargains with desperadoes!" he spat. "Go ahead and kill me. I'll release no prisoners!"

Señor Desperado paused. His eyes flashed with admiration for this gringo who was being faithful to his duty in the face of overwhelming odds and threatened death.

"*'Sta bueno*," grunted Señor Desperado, turning to his men. "March El Capitan over to the Ranger headquarters, amigos. Perhaps we can persuade him that it would be better to bargain with desperadoes than to become a dead man, no?"

Surrounded by rifle-armed Legionnaires, Captain Spear was hustled over to the shadow-blocked porch of his own office casa.

Then, motioning for the Legionnaires to release their grips on Captain Spear, Frederico knotted his hand into a knuckled fist.

"It pains me to do this, El Capitan," apologized Frederico as he drew back his arm, "but it is my only recourse. I do not wish to kill my . . . my future father-in-law!"

Spear saw the uppercut start, but there was no ducking it. The blow smacked against the point of the Ranger's jaw, bruising flesh.

With a groan, Captain Spear slammed back against a porch post, then skidded to a sitting position at Señor Desperado's feet, head lolling on his shoulders, eyes glazed with insensibility.

"I have a plan of my own, compañeros!" whispered Frederico, swiftly taking off Spear's Ranger hat and putting it on his own head. "Our amigos in the *juzgado* are as good as free again!"

Frederico stripped the blue Ranger coat off the unconscious captain's torso, put it on himself and fastened gilt buttons and heavy buckles. Then he adjusted the shiny scabbard and cavalry saber at his own hip.

That done, Frederico rummaged through Spear's pockets and pulled out a ring of keys which fitted every lock in the Ranger barracks.

While his puzzled Legion brothers stared at him, Frederico pocketed the keys, picked up Spear's limp form, and carried him into the darkened office. There he stretched Captain Spear across his own desk.

The hidalgo paused only long enough to fish inside a desk drawer for his own silver-mounted Colts. Then he turned and strode briskly outside to his men.

"Line up like the *soldados* you are imitating," ordered Señor Desperado crisply. "We are going over to rescue our Legion brothers, and there will be jail guards to pass on the way."

A moment later, twelve uniformed members of the Legion of Vengeance marched on the double-quick across the parade ground to the door of the long, tile-roofed *juzgado*, or guardhouse, where the Legion prisoners were being held, awaiting death.

Two Rangers, each with a rifle on his shoulder, snapped their heels to attention and saluted stiffly as the

man they assumed to be Captain Leo Spear approached, his face invisible in the shadow of his Ranger hat.

A low-voiced order in Spanish from Frederico, and the members of the fake firing squad pounced upon the unsuspecting guards. Rifle butts thudded briskly across skulls, before the guards could cry out an alarm.

Swiftly Señor Desperado tried key after key on the massive lock of the guardhouse door. Less than a minute later he swung it open on heavy iron hinges, and called out softly to the nineteen prisoners dozing within:

"Amigos! Out, everyone—and make no unnecessary sound! We must get out of here before the Rangeros are aroused!"

Keeping within the blot of shadow along the barracks, Frederico led his excited *compadres* to the front gate of the Legion compound. Hidden in the shadows of a sentry shack were two bound and gagged lookouts—earlier victims of Ramon Chileno's deception.

Out in a shady alley toward the plaza, saddled horses awaited them under the protection of Gregorio Mateo. One of them was Frederico's own palomino, Aguila, which Ramon Chileno had picked up at the Eagle Rock Indian village on his way to Los Angeles.

Frederico chuckled as he saw the size of the remuda. Ramon had purposely brought enough mounts to enable the entire group to make their getaway.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

RAMON CHILENO EXPLAINS.

NOT until they had put a dozen miles between them and the pueblo of Los Angeles did the fleeing Legion band draw rein to rest their mounts.

Riders pressed about Señor Desperado in a clamoring horde, the rescued prisoners joining their uniform-disguised comrades in a clamor of mutual congratulations and general laughter at the confusion that would reign in Los Angeles when the news of their coup became generally known.

"*Hermanos—hermanos!*" called out Señor Desperado, lifting his hands to silence the jubilant Californians. "I am burning up with my curiosity. You have many explanations to make for tonight's doings, Ramon! Start from the beginning, and tell us how you brought this miracle to be!"

Young Ramon grinned broadly and flicked trail dust off his brass-buttoned Ranger uniform, which fitted him as if tailored to measure.

"The credit is not due to me, amigos," confessed the South American. "Tonight's rescue was conceived in the brain of our mysterious gringo compadre, El Poncho!"

Señor Desperado felt a warm thrill of gratitude sweep his body at this news. He believed he knew the reason, now, for the absence of Jack Harrington at the supposed execution rites.

"It was this way," began Ramon, the Legion riders listening tensely to his recital. "Señora Mateo told you, Frederico, that we planned to attack the barracks at midnight on Wednesday, and rescue you?"

"Yes," answered Frederico. "The American judge feared some outbreak might occur—that was why he set up the hour of my death. But how did you know—"

"We were all gathered in secret at a cantina on El Calle Loma tonight," resumed Ramon Chileno, "when we were visited by the good Señora Mateo. She brought us the dismaying news that you were to be shot tonight—and we feared all was

lost, for we were not prepared to attack so soon."

Frederico frowned in bewilderment. "But how would Señora Mateo—a lowly *cociñera*—know the judge's secret orders?"

That, Ramon explained, was where the mystery rider, El Poncho, entered the picture.

"El Poncho visited Señora Mateo at her kitchen after sundown. El Poncho had somehow learned of the judge's plans."

Señor Desperado, remembering that it had been Corporal Harrington who had brought him his death warrant that evening, had no difficulty in figuring out how El Poncho came into possession of his secret information; but he did not speak to the Legionnaires of what he knew.

"El Poncho brought with him a large bundle, which he gave to Señora Mateo," Ramon went on. "This bundle contained the twelve Rangero uniforms we are wearing. El Poncho had smuggled them out of the Ranger supply house without El Capitan Spear or anyone else knowing it. In the bundle was a message—"

So saying, Ramon produced from a saddlebag a folded piece of cardboard—one of the reward posters which El Poncho used for conveying his written messages.

Holding the card up to the brilliant moonlight, Señor Desperado read aloud for the benefit of the riders about him:

"Senora Mateo:

"If you are to rescue Señor Desperado it must be tonight, for the alcalde, Rex Fremont, has issued secret orders to Captain Spear for Frederico's execution at midnight.

"Here are one dozen Ranger uniforms. Have your Legion friends don these uniforms, and present themselves in the alley behind the Bella Union Hotel at eleven o'clock tonight. I will be there and give you army rifles and sabers, and tell you how to proceed.

"I must have the pledge of the Legionnaires that no harm will befall the life of any Ranger tonight, before I will let the plan proceed.

"If things go as I think they will, Señor Desperado will be rescued without difficulty.

"El Poncho."

"We met El Poncho behind the Bella Union Hotel and gave him our word of honor that we would kill no one," Ramon went on. "El Poncho led us to where rifles and sabers were hidden—and it was very simple to fool the gringo sentries at the gates. As for the rest—you know it."

Hearty laughter resounded in the group of horsemen.

"Tonight's adventure will go down in history, amigos," laughed Señor Desperado, picking up his reins. "It is a very great debt we owe to El Poncho. My only hope is that Ramon and the rest of you will not like your flashy Rangero uniforms so well that you will want to desert your Legion and join Capitan Spear's army!"

Voices lifted in boisterous song, the Legionnaires galloped on across the moonlit prairies toward Puma Canyon. Before dawn had gilded the mountain peaks they had made their triumphal homecoming, turned their lathered horses over to *mozos*, and prepared to catch up on lost sleep.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TWO SURPRISED VISITORS.

SENOR DESPERADO was sound asleep at midafternoon, when he was roused by the hand of his former major-domo on the Rancho Mariposa, white-headed old Gregorio Mateo.

Sitting up drowsily and blinking in the semidarkness of the cavern

which the Legion of Vengeance employed as sleeping quarters, Frederico regarded the old Mexican with mock annoyance.

"*Forque* do you awaken me when I was having a dream about my enemy, El Capitan Spear?" yawned the bandit leader, stretching mightily. "He was in the act of giving me his daughter's hand in marriage, Gregorio, when you—"

Gregorio's beefy shoulders lifted and fell impatiently.

"It is time to forget dreams, *hijo!*" panted the oldster. "El Capitan Spear is here in Puma Canyon at this moment—and I do not believe he comes to offer you his daughter's hand, judging from the stern look on his face!"

Frederico's eyes batted open, fully awake. He drew on his boots with feverish haste.

"Captain Spear is—here?" he gasped, hastily buckling on his gun belts and knotting his red sash. "You mean—we captured him?"

"No, Frederico. He came alone, and unarmed. The gringo capitan wishes to make *habla*—to talk. That is all I can say—unless it be that I do not trust the gringo dog!"

Frederico hurried outside the cave, to find the narrow floor of Puma Canyon filled with Legionnaires. In the center of the milling throng was Captain Spear, seated on a bay mustang, glowering contemptuously at the ring of guns leveled at him.

"El Capitan Spear!" called Frederico, elbowing through the crowd and halting at the Ranger's stirrup. "You are indeed a brave man, capitan, to bait the lion in his very den. I suppose you have come for your uniform that I borrowed, *verdad?*"

Spear flushed at the resounding laughter which greeted Frederico's remark. He drew himself up with dignity and said:

"I still do not know how you engineered your escape last night, Señor Desperado, unless there is a traitor and a spy in my own ranks. If I catch him, it will mean a death sentence for treason. But that is not what I came here for today."

The hidalgo bowed, teeth flashing in a friendly smile. A courageous man himself, Señor Desperado admired courage in another, even thought it be in his sworn enemy.

"It is only fair to tell you," went on Captain Spear ominously, "that I did not ride out to these mountains alone. At the Devil's Gate I have amassed my entire Ranger troop, together with two hundred Angelenos, all armed to the teeth. Also we have three cannon which we obtained from a gunboat anchored off San Pedro."

Castalina's brows arched in surprise. Then he laughed.

"You plan to lay siege to Puma Canyon with an army, complete with cannon?" he asked in Spanish. "Is that what you came to tell me, my capitan?"

Muscles twitched on Spear's windbitten face.

"I have come to demand the surrender of the Legion!" he rasped. "We are prepared to blast the Puma Canyon to bits, if need be—or failing in that, to cut you off and starve you by degrees. I am determined to stamp out the Legion, by force if not by a treaty of some sort."

Señor Desperado pursed his lips thoughtfully, mulling over Spear's ultimatum. Then, before he could make answer, there sounded a commotion behind him.

The crowd turned curiously, to see a dozen mounted Legionnaires coming into Puma Canyon from the north end, bringing with them a

heavily bound prisoner, trussed like a mummy with rope.

Momentarily forgetting Captain Spear's presence, Frederico strode out to greet the incoming riders. He recognized them as rimrock lookouts, who patrolled the box end of Puma Canyon day and night, to warn the desperado band of surprise attacks.

Their prisoner was no gringo; he was a slightly built Mexican, with jet-black hair which fell to his shoulders. Cartridge belts formed an X across the prisoner's chest, and his eyes held the fiendish glitter of a rattlesnake's.

"Don Frederico," panted the leader of the horsemen, "we captured this hombre attempting to let himself down over the rimrock into Puma Canyon, by means of a rope. He says he has come from the El Dorado country, to talk with the famous Señor Desperado. Shall we kill him?"

Frederico scowled in genuine surprise. He had never laid eyes on this vicious-faced Mexican before, to his knowledge; yet he could tell from the bold arrogance of the prisoner that he was no ordinary peon.

"No—let us hear what he has to say first," said Señor Desperado, motioning for his men to ease the knots of his bonds. "Who are you, *hombrecito?* Why do you try to sneak like a puma into our hide-out?"

Captain Spear, his horse moving forward along with the interested Mexican horde, scowled intently as he saw the Mexican stranger stare up into Castalina's eyes and answer in Spanish:

"I am a brother buscadero, Señor Desperado. I have come from the gold country to the north—to make a bargain with you. You and I, Señor Desperado, are the most powerful Californians alive. We have a common bond—our hatred for the gringo. It is time we crossed trails—and joined our forces for the common cause."

Frederico, his thumbs hooked in his gun belts, stared down at the brutish-faced Mexican with unveiled curiosity.

"You came a long ways to make a bargain with me, señor? And what is your name?"

The stranger swelled with a fierce pride as he glanced about at the Californians surrounding him.

"My name," he said boastfully, "is that of an outlaw more dreaded even than you, Señor Desperado. My name strikes fear into gringos from Sutter's Fort to Mexico. I am Joaquin Murietta!"

CHAPTER XXX.

MURIETTA GETS HIS ANSWER.

A LOW murmur of excitement rippled through the crowd of sombreroed Legionnaires, and their amazement was echoed by a low oath from Captain Leo Spear.

Joaquin Murietta! The ruthless bandido whose butchery and savage exploits had terrorized the gold camps since 1850, a maurauding criminal whose cruelty was to become legend in song and story for generations yet unborn!

Of the entire group which had heard Murietta's boastful self-introduction, only Frederico Castalina seemed unimpressed.

"*Si*—your name is dreaded by the gringo, as much as the devil's name would be," agreed Señor Desperado. "But tell me—why were you caught spying on Puma Canyon, Murietta?"

The bandit leered evilly, his beady eyes glittering over his solemn-faced audience.

"I am camped with my band on the north slopes of the Sierra Madres, near the Vasquez Rocks," Joa-

quin Murietta answered. "I came here to offer you a partnership with me, Señor Desperado."

Frederico continued to stare down at the notorious *ladrone* chieftain.

"Indeed? A partnership, Murietta? And why do you choose us for your generous and noble offer, *hombrecito?*"

Joaquin Murietta darkened wrathfully at the word "*hombrecito,*" which has its American equivalent in the disrespectful "runt." It had begun to dawn on the bandit's consciousness that he was not dominating the situation, and the knowledge galled him.

"If your Legion of Vengeance and my band of highwaymen should join forces, señor, we could take California away from the gringo!" declared Murietta. "You and I could set ourselves up as governors of California —me of the north, you of the south. We could be the most powerful hombres of our generation!"

Captain Spear's gaze swiveled to Señor Desperado, in time to see the hidalgo's lips compress on a smile of scorn.

"You and I are fighting for different causes, Murietta," retorted Castalina, restraining his temper. "You and your band of killers massacre helpless women and children, strangle innocent Chinese miners without number, so I have heard. You shoot men in the back from ambush. You pillage gold camps for the sheer pleasure of slaying and thieving. Is it not so, *hombrecito?*"

Murietta dropped back, abashed by Señor Desperado's cold reception of his proposal. Dread began to replace the arrogant glitter in his snakelike eyes.

"Who are you, Señor Desperado, to condemn anyone for murdering gringos?" said the bandit, with an attempt at defiance. "Do you not hate the Americano dogs, even as I do?"

Castalina appeared to consider before replying.

"I do hate certain Americanos—for stealing land and cattle from these men who compose my Legion of Vengeance," admitted Señor Desperado. "But my men are not butchers or thieves. We take only that which rightfully was ours before the gringo land-grabbers came. When we have won back all our haciendas, we will ride the trail of revenge no longer. There is a vast difference between our cause and the heartless, cowardly banditry practiced by Joaquin Murietta and his pirates on horseback!"

Murietta mouthed a foul Spanish oath, and glanced about him uncertainly, fear beginning to dull the glitter in his eyes.

"I suppose," he whined, "that you intend to collect the reward which the government has placed on my life, Señor Desperado, now that you have me in your grasp?"

Castalina shook his head.

"Not so, Murietta. You came to Puma County alone. I will not take a coward's advantage of you, *hombrecito.* Go back to your band of robbers and tell them that between them and us there can never be a bond of brotherhood, any more than lions could consort with swine. Adios, Joaquin Murietta!"

For a moment the cold-hearted Mexican stared at Castalina as if unable to comprehend his dismissal. Then he felt himself rudely jerked right about face, and escorted back toward the end of Puma Canyon by grim-faced Legionnaires.

The touch of Captain Spear's arm on his shoulder snapped Frederico back to earth. He turned, almost startled at the California Ranger's presence in his camp.

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"With your permission, Frederico—I am going to return to my soldiers down in Arroyo Seco," Spear said huskily.

Castalina nodded.

"*Seguro*—you are free to go, El Capitan," he answered. "But before you attack us, it would be well for you to know that even an army ten times the size of yours could never penetrate the narrow cliffs of our hide-out."

Spear started to speak, but Señor Desperado hurried on:

"Nor could you starve us out, even in many months. We have ample grass and water for our horses, and food and ammunition stored away for ourselves against this emergency. We know of dozens of secret exits from Puma Canyon, by which we could come and go under cover of darkness without a Rangero knowing we did so."

Castalina waved a hand at the frowning granite cliffs.

"Nature has erected ramparts of stone which would not feel your cannon shots any more than an elephant would feel a mosquito's bite, my capitan. I am afraid you would be laying yourself open to the laughter of all California, if you sought to destroy Puma Canyon or force my Legion of Vengeance to surrender."

A strange smile played on Captain Spear's lips as he reined his mustang back toward the narrow entrance of Puma Canyon—a corridor he realized, with his military wisdom, that a single man with a rifle could easily defend against an entire battalion.

"I am going to order my men back to Los Angeles, Frederico," said the American, leaning down to shake the hidalgo's hand to the amazement of all his spectators. "But it is not because I realize the strength of your defenses that I am retreating. It is because I understand, for the first time, the real cause you and your men are fighting for, Frederico. Your

words to Joaquin Murietta just now have told me much that I did not understand before. I am sure—that Grace will applaud your words, when I repeat them to her tonight."

With which strange farewell, Captain Leo Spear touched spurs to horse and made his departure from the Legionnaires he had vowed to destroy.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE RETURN OF EL PONCHO.

PUMA CANYON, which for two months had resembled a fortress peopled by fighting men and guarded during every hour of the twenty-four by eagle-eyed sentries, took on a fiesta atmosphere on the following Sunday.

There was a double reason behind the celebration. Was this not the fateful day originally named by the judge in Los Angeles for the execution of Señor Desperado and his fellow desperadoes?

And were not they on hand, laughing and merry as they mingled with their Legion compañeros today?

But the main reason for the fiesta was a traditional one. Every November there had occurred a day of feasting and merry-making on the Rancho Mariposa—for it marked the anniversary of the day when Frederico Pasqual Castalina had been adopted into Don José's household —therefore, his *cumpleaño*, or birthday.

Today then, was Frederico's twenty-first birthday; or at any rate the eighteenth anniversary of his adoption, for Señora Rosita Castalina had judged Frederico's age to be three summers when they had taken him into the Castalina family after the boy's parents had been slain by Apache warriors.

Señora Mateo had ridden a plodding mule up to Puma Canyon from the pueblo church, to take charge of the barbeque banquet being held in the lair of the Legion of Vengeance. After all, had not the buxom *cacíñera* of Rancho Mariposa presided over Frederico's birthday festivals since his earliest boyhood?

And so it was that a holiday mood pervaded the outlaw encampment on this sunny morning, to prove that the fiesta spirit of Spanish California was not yet dead.

Wine was in abundance. The flesh of young bulls, pigs and sheep was slowly roasting in their own juices, in underground bake ovens outside the Legion's cavern.

Señora Mateo, flushed with her importance, bustled about, a lone woman among the gun-toting and sombreroed members of California's most notorious outlaw horde, busy serving gallons of *frijoles* sauced with her own rich red *salsa de chili* for which Rancho Mariposa had been famous in bygone years.

Roast wild turkey, shot by Legion hunters in the Sierra Madre foothills, filled the canyon with their aroma. There was fresh venison from the same source, and *tortilla* cakes, with a large number of *dulces*, or desserts, to tickle outlaw palates —oranges and black figs, candied melon rinds, luscious limes and pomegranates.

Frederico's face radiated his happiness on this gala day but there was a bitter undertone beating in his heart. How different his twenty-first birthday was from the way Don José and Rosita had always dreamed it would be!

This was the day Don José had often boasted about, when he would turn over to his foster son the active management of the Rancho Mariposa, and Frederico would assume the title of a proud California Don.

But now, Don José was in his grave, and Curd Rockler was enjoying the cool patio and scenic vistas of the hacienda; while Frederico was a hounded outlaw with a staggering reward on his scalp, a grim-faced gunman fighting a desperate war against the Americanos who claimed California for their own.

"It will not be always thus, *amigo mio*," said Señora Mateo, divining his thoughts as she came upon Señor Desperado standing at the portals of Puma Canyon, his agate-brown eyes focused on Arroyo Seco and the far-flung mesas of the homeland from which he was an exile. "Some day, and soon, perhaps, you will drive the evil Señor Rockler from our home, and we will all be happy again."

Frederico sighed, and put an affectionate arm about the fat *cociñera's* waist.

"*Si*—but the struggle is bitter and long, *querida*," he said heavily. "We of the Legion are not free men; we live always under the shadow of danger. We cannot ride abroad in the land without fear of an ambush bullet or a knife in the back as we sleep. Not until our cause is won and my Legionnaires are once more living on their *haciendas*, will I be truly happy, señora."

The misty-eyed old cook tried to brighten her countenance.

"You remember, that day in Capitan Spear's jail, I told you I had a message for you?" she asked mysteriously. "A message, given me in trust by your sainted *madre*, Señora Rosita, to deliver to you on the day you became a grown man?"

Frederico nodded, his face clouding at the memory of his long-dead foster mother who had preceded Don José to the grave by more than a decade.

"*Si*, Señora Mateo. That day has arrived—though it is not as happy as Señora Rosita would have wished. What is the message?"

Señora Mateo rubbed her temple, seeking to marshal her memory.

"It was this," she began slowly. "When my mistress adopted you, Frederico, you were an orphan. Your padre and madre were slain in the Arizona desert by Apache savages. To spare you grief, we never mentioned your own history to you. Yet Rosita *mia* knew that some day, you would want to know the facts of your past."

Frederico listened, breathless with interest. True, during his youth, he had often wondered who his parents might have been; but he had never queried Don José on the matter, knowing the old grandee would tell him when the time was ripe.

"All these things were writ on a parchment which Señora Rosita took to the padre at Mission San Gabriel to keep," went on Señora Mateo. "The holy priest, Father Ladistro, put the parchment into safekeeping, and vowed to give it to you when you came for it on your twenty-first birthday, Frederico."

Señor Desperado peered off to the southward, beyond the hazy rim of the horizon where San Gabriel Mission lay, beginning to crumble and decay now that the Americans had robbed the Mission of its soap factory, its fertile fields, and other sources of income.

"Padre Ladistro is still at the Mission," the hidalgo muttered. "He is very aged, being of more than ninety summers. But I will go to him, *es verdad*—and learn the story of my heritage from him, as it was entrusted to him by my *madre*."

And, then, Señor Desperado's sharp eyes caught sight of a rider who had appeared around the bend

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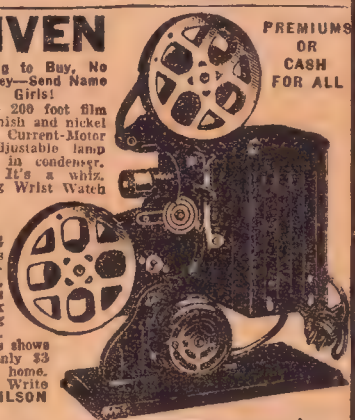

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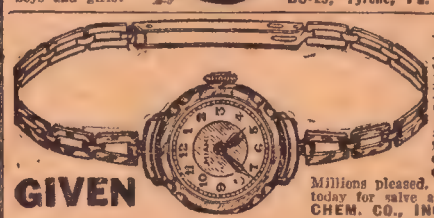

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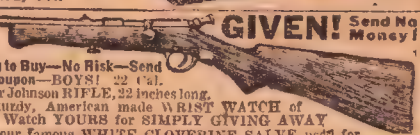

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of the Arroyo Seco trail below Puma Canyon—a lone *caballero,* but even at this distance Frederico recognized the flowing green poncho, the gay-colored serape which the horseman wore as a mask.

"El Poncho comes!" Señor Desperado cried out to the sentry perched on a cliff ledge with an ever-alert rifle. "Do not fire at him, Rodolpho. I will go greet him. Perhaps he has come to help me celebrate my *cumpleaños*—"

Eagerly Señor Desperado strode down the trail to meet his oncoming friend, golden spurs chiming musically, red sash aswing.

Soon El Poncho reined to a curvetting halt in front of him, a gloved hand lifted in silent greeting.

"We celebrate the fiesta of my birthday inside Puma Canyon, El Poncho," smiled Frederico. "Can you join us, El Corporal?"

El Poncho shook his head, leaned from saddle and dropped another of his dramatic messages on the ground at Frederico's feet.

Then, in his same flourishing manner as of old, El Poncho reined about and galloped his Ranger pony down the trail and out of sight.

Frederico stooped to pick up El Poncho's latest message:

SENOR FREDERICO:

Señor Curd Rockler applied to Captain Spear last night for an armed escort to accompany him to the El Camino Real's ford on Rio Simi.

Rockler is meeting the Wells-Fargo stagecoach at that place. On the stage will be Two-finger Fenton, his trail boss who delivered the Rancho Mariposa cattle to Placer Forks. They reach the ford at noon.

Señor Fenton will be carrying the gold dust which he received in payment for the cattle. Señor Rockler wishes to make sure he is not robbed on his way back to Rancho Mariposa; hence his application to the Rangers for protection.

Buena fortuna!

EL PONCHO.

Frederico laughed, and then his face hardened abruptly and he went back into Puma Canyon. Seeking out his lieutenant, Ramon Chileno, among the celebrating Legionnaires, Frederico led him to one side.

The Legion was busy watching a mock *fandango* to the music of a quartet playing violin, guitar, flageolet, and 'cello. They did not notice Frederico removing a horn cup of wine from Ramon's hand, as he said:

"Do not saddle your wit with strong drink, Ramon. We have work to do—against our enemy, Curd Rockler."

Ramon jerked to attention, fingering his six-gun holsters in anticipation.

"*Si,* Frederico? *Muy bueno!* What is it now?"

Señor Desperado handed Ramon the message from El Poncho. After Ramon had scanned it carefully, Frederico said:

"You and I will ride alone to the Rio Simi tonight, and help welcome Señor Fenton *mañana* in the manner he deserves, Ramon."

Chielno grinned with anticipation. "It was Fenton who shot you from behind, causing you many weeks of pain in the casa of Señor Lewis Rowley, up north," he reminded his chief. "We indeed have a debt to pay Señor Fenton."

Señor Desperado turned back to the celebrating throng.

"Perhaps it was just as well, Ramon, that we failed to capture the Rancho Mariposa beef in Tejon Pass," he said. "The gringo cowboys had the hard work of driving them north—but we will enjoy the gold dust which Curd Rockler received in payment for my padre's steers!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

LASSO MAGIC.

THE central portion of the stage-coach ford across the Rio Simi was thickly choked with willow and salt cedar, which in the dry season of the year formed a small island dividing the stream at its center.

Winter rainy season still being a few weeks off, the Rio Simi was now only a trickling creek on the north side of the brushy island, while the main current sluiced over the gravel bar on the south.

In the cool, hushed hour before the dawn, on this late November morning, two riders in gala Spanish attire had splashed across the stream from the south bank, to secrete themselves and their silver-trapped horses in the dense bosk in midriver.

Señor Desperado and his South American saddle partner, Ramon Chileno, had realized the wisdom of ambushing themselves early, for by midmorning there suddenly appeared on the south bank of the Rio Simi, a half dozen horsemen who promptly stripped saddles from mounts and picketed the horses in the shade of nearby live oaks.

Señor Desperado, quenching his cigarette and squatting comfortably in the thicket, eyed the horsemen with interest.

His blood kindled at sight of beefy-chested Curd Rockler, his cinnamon-colored mustache adding a sinister note to his appearance. The five remaining riders were California Rangers, decked out in their full regimentals—sky-blue uniforms, polished taffy-brown boots, with holstered Colts and nickel-plated saber scabbards, cone-peaked Ranger hats, and badges and epaulets which gleamed in the sunlight.

There were four Rangers in the party, and in charge of them was the sturdy-shouldered young Corporal, Jack Harrington.

"It appears that El Poncho wishes to be on hand this morning," muttered Señor Desperado absently, "and *esta bueno*. The stage will be along soon—and then the fun will begin."

Ramon Chileno, lying on his stomach in the long grass alongside Frederico, glanced up curiously at his leader's words, his attention diverted from the temptation of a brown cigarette which he knew he dared not light, lest the smoke betray their presence in the bushes to enemy eyes.

"What did you say—about El Poncho?" queried the Chileno.

Castalina flushed guiltily. So far he had not voiced his certainty that El Poncho was Harrington in disguise, for Harrington had expressly asked him, on the night of his intended execution, not to mention the identity of El Poncho to anyone.

"I merely said," Frederico evaded, "that El Poncho should be here to see the excitement. But we must cease talking, Ramon—and pray that the Rangers do not take it into their heads to meet the stage on the north bank."

But Harrington, Curd Rockler and the four privates had no intention of venturing out into the torrid sunshine. They disported themselves with cigarettes and jokes for the space of an hour, and finally adjourned to a bank upstream where they stripped off their clothes and enjoyed a cool swim in a deep pool of the Rio.

By the coming of noon, however, the Rangers were busy saddling up their broncs, while Curd Rockler paced nervously up and down the bank, his eyes scanning the stage-coach road to northward.

Shortly afterward there came to

the ears of Señor Desperado the far-off rattle of stagecoach wheels on adobe, the drumming hoofs of an approaching six-horse span.

Within a few minutes the ambushers caught sight of the oncoming Concord, its yellow running gear and red body thick with dust as it topped the mountain grade and dipped down into the valley of the Simi River.

A pulse raced on Señor Desperado's neck as he unholstered his silver cap-and-ball pistols and spun their cylinders.

"The stage will pass within a few feet of us, Ramon," whispered Señor Desperado. "We must act swiftly, for the Rangeros are good shots, remember."

Ramon nodded. He scuttled through the brush to where their two horses were hobbled, and unbuckled the leather straps about the forelegs of their mounts.

Then he uncoiled his pliable horsehair riata, shaking out a loop with the skill born of years of rope work on the Rancho Mariposa range.

By the time these preparations were finished, the Concord had reached the north bank and the driver was allowing his jaded team to water themselves at the stream's edge.

Two-finger Fenton, clad in a battered Stetson and a black gambler's coat, leaned from the leather-curtained window and watched Curd Rockler climb aboard the saddle of his butterfly-branded mustang.

"No sign o' any bandits so fer, boss!" yelled Fenton, his voice mirroring his relief at sight of the Ranger convoy awaiting them on the opposite river bank. "So we're O. K. from hyar on home."

The stage jounced on its thoroughbraces as it headed down a low cut bank and into the river, water frothing about its ponderous wheels.

Seconds later the leaders of the team were abreast of the willow-thicketed island, where Señor Desperado and Ramon crouched in readiness, like panthers about to spring on unsuspecting prey.

There was only one passenger aboard, that being Fenton. A shotgun guard rode with the driver, but he was stretching lazily.

Suddenly, with a deft flick of his arm, Ramon Chileno tossed his broad lasso up and out of the thicket. The noose settled in a wide circle about the stagecoach driver and the unprepared guard, yanking them together as the noose tightened with a jerk.

Squalling with alarm, the tooler jammed on his brake pedal and clawed at the rope. At the same instant, Frederico's scarlet-and-black figure eased out of the protecting willows, to thrust a glittering, silver-mounted pistol through the stage window.

Two-finger Fenton turned pasty-yellow with horror as he caught sight of Señor Desperado's grinning teeth and slitted eyes, behind that menacing gun. The muzzle of the Colt rested on the sill of the stagecoach window, its black bore trained at Fenton's head.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FENTON'S GUNS.

"COME on out, Fenton!" invited Señor Desperado in an icy whisper, as he wrenched open the stage door with his free hand. "You are coming with me. *Andale*—or you will come a dead man!"

In the meantime, Ramon Chileno had jerked his full weight against the lariat. Thrown off balance by the noose which bound them to-

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gether, the two Wells-Fargo men were dragged bodily off the stage seat and pitched into the cushioning chaparral.

With a brittle laugh, Señor Desperado seized Fenton by an ear and hauled him roughly out of the stage. The yelling gringo sought to drag a Colt six-gun from a holster at his armpit, but Frederico clubbed the outlaw sharply across the temple with the barrel of his own revolver.

Hurling Fenton's moaning form across the palomino's saddle, Frederico swung aboard Aguila, forking leather behind the cantle.

The entire procedure had taken but a dozen seconds. With a hoarse bawl of anger, Curd Rockler and his Ranger convoy spurred out into the stream in pursuit.

Roweling the palomino into action, Frederico ripped out of the screening tangle of foliage and splashed across the north branch of the river, his getaway hidden from Ranger guns by the intervening island.

Before Frederico had vanished in the chaparral to northward, Ramon Chileno had gained the opposite bank on his own wiry pony.

The stagecoach driver and his disgruntled shotgun guard were clawing desperately at the lariat which had yanked them off the Concord, even as the Rangers charged past them, Curd Rockler in the lead, lashing them with frantic oaths.

Racing like twin phantoms into the undergrowth which furred the border of the stagecoach road, Ramon Chileno and his Legion chief spurred over the top of a low knoll and into the dip beyond.

There, with an unvoiced signal, Frederico waved Chileno to ride straight ahead, while he spurred off into a madrone thicket, Fenton's body still hanging limply over his saddle.

Hardly had Frederico secreted himself in the dense brush than Curd Rockler and the Ranger quintet crashed over the hilltop in pursuit. Seeing the dust-smoking trail which Ramon had taken into the chaparral beyond, the pursuing horsemen, following Harrington and Curd Rockler, sped away on the chase.

Señor Desperado chuckled and rode out into the open once more. Selecting a weed-grown game trail which led eastward toward the canyon-gashed mountains, he headed off in that direction at a leisurely pace.

Shots rattled off to the north, as Ramon led the posse of Rangers farther and farther astray.

Reaching the crest of the next ridge, Frederico reined Aguila to a halt and slid to the ground, hauling Fenton with him. It was but the work of a moment to rip Fenton's shirt open and locate a buckskin money belt strapped about his middle, each pocket heavy with gold dust.

Fenton sat up dizzily, rubbing his sore temple and blinking like a drunken man as he saw Señor Desperado unbuckle his treasure belt and stow it in a pocket of his own saddlebags.

"*Gracias*, Fenton!" laughed Señor Desperado, hauling the gringo crook to his feet. "Shall I give you a receipt for the Rancho Mariposa cattle payment, which you so kindly delivered to me?"

Two-finger Fenton wabbled groggily on his feet, snarling like a hyena as he felt his abductor unbuckle his gun belt and hurl it, shoulder holster and all, into the chaparral.

Down in the Simi River Valley, Curd Rockler and the Rangers were fighting through brush and rocks in

hopeless pursuit of Ramon Chileno, totally unaware of the fact that Señor Desperado had eluded them. The loud snorts of their horses, the oaths and yells of Curd Rockler, and the useless drumming of gunfire reached Two-finger Fenton's ears and made him realize that help would not be forthcoming.

"Remembering how you shot me in the back with a buckshot gun," reminded Frederico, playfully twirling a Colt six-gun by its trigger guard, "I suppose I should kill you where you stand, Señor Fenton. How will you take a bullet—in the head, or in the heart?"

Fenton's evil face went slippery with perspiration. He licked his lips frantically and his buckshot eyes darted about for a way of escape.

"Do not fear—I am not the breed to shoot down an unarmed man," said Frederico Castalina. "*Vante*—Fenton. I have the gold that was rightfully mine. Go back to Rancho Mariposa, and enjoy yourself there. Tell Señor Rockler that he will not live to count his next calf crop—tell him that is a promise from Frederico Castalina!"

Eager to be away from the menacing Californian, Two-finger Fenton stumbled off down the slope, heading for the river.

Then, hearing the creak of saddle leather behind him as Señor Desperado mounted his palomino, Two-finger Fenton whirled when he had taken less than a dozen steps.

Crouched like a gorilla, Fenton shot back the cuffs of his black gambler's coat, to reveal the gleaming, wicked snouts of two stubby-barreled .44 derringers.

For a panic-stricken instant Frederico stared over his shoulder at death, down the black bores of Fenton's hide-out guns. He had not suspected Fenton of carrying the treacherous weapons in wrist clips hidden by his sleeves.

Then, with a stabbing motion of his right arm, Señor Desperado snapped his left-hand six-gun from holster, as he leaped sideways.

Fenton's derringer roared harshly, their whining slugs boring through space occupied by Frederico's body an instant before.

The big silver weapon in the Californian's grasp thundered and spat flame, simultaneously with the deep-throated crash of Fenton's derringer.

"*Aaaargh!*" With a gagging sound welling in his throat, Two-finger Fenton lurched back before the heavy impact of a Colt slug drilling his breastbone.

Then, as Frederico fanned gun smoke away from his eyes with a ball-tasseled sombrero, he saw Fenton's knees buckle, toppling his corpse backward to roll soddenly down the slope.

Frederico had had his vengeance against the man who had delayed him in the Salinas River country with his treachery; a delay that had cost Frederico the privilege of ever seeing Don José alive again.

The sound of crashing shots marking Frederico's showdown with Two-finger Fenton reached the ears of Curd Rockler and his Ranger guard during a lull in the chase, in which they found themselves blocked on all sides by motionless walls of rock maple and live oak and wild ivy, which held no clue as to the whereabouts of their quarry.

In confusion, the riders stared about through the veiling brush, seeking to locate the source of the gunfire.

"Sounded like it was up on the ridge yonder, men!" clipped Corporal Jack Harrington, spurring his lathered mount. "Come on!"

By sheer chance, rather than because they had a marked trail to follow, Corporal Harrington and his squad of Rangers galloped out into the grassy clearing atop the hogback ridge a few minutes later, to stare down at the sprawled corpse of Two-finger Fenton, staining the wild clover with his life blood.

"Looks like we're too late, Rockler!" grunted Corporal Harrington, swinging out of his saddle to inspect the outlaw's corpse. "We must have trailed the wrong hombre down in the flats."

The color drained from Rockler's face as he pawed through his dead partner's clothing, to discover the loss of the gold-laden money belt which Fenton had worn back from Placer Forks.

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"The blasted greaser killed Fenton an' robbed him o' my *oro!*" screamed Rockler, his face purpling with hate as he shook a knuckle-bunched fist under Harrington's nose. "It's yore fault, Harrington, fer not ketchin' Señor Desperado months ago!"

Corporal Harrington pointed to the derringers which Fenton still clutched in death-stiffening hands.

"I think Fenton had more than an even break, Rockler!" retorted Harrington with frigid emphasis. "Personally—if not officially—I don't mind telling you that California is better off rid of a scum like Fent—"

Harrington broke off, as he caught sight of a pair of sombreroed Californians rearing their horses on the rocky crest of the next ridge, well out of rifle range, their brilliant clothing sharp-etched against the enamel-blue skyline.

Curd Rockler whipped a carbine from his saddle boot and triggered a volley at the distant horsemen, but they merely waved their sombreros in taunting farewell and vanished over the horizon. Señor Desperado and Ramon Chileno were homeward bound to their lair at Puma Canyon.

Realizing the impossibility of overtaking their quarry, Curd Rockler turned to Harrington as a new hunch struck him.

"How in hell," stormed Curd Rockler, his eyes burning into the placid-faced corporal, "did Señor Desperado know that Fenton was comin' on today's stagecoach? How in hell did he know that Fenton would be carryin' that gold dust?"

Rockler's eyes failed to shake the calm of Harrington's bearing. No expression crossed the corporal's impassive face, as Rockler screamed an accusation of treachery:

"Some one o' you Rangers double-crossed me, blast yuh! Nobody but

me an' the Rangers knowed about Fenton comin' back with that gold—and one o' you tipped off Señor Desperado!"

Harrington climbed aboard his horse.

"*Quién sabe?*" he said, shrugging. "Come on, Rangers. As for you, Rockler—you'd better bury what's left of Fenton here. No use running the risk of poisoning some innocent buzzard or coyote."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FREDERICO LEARNS HIS PAST.

A FORTNIGHT of heavy rains lashed the California mountains and converted Arroyo Seco into a thundering torrent of uncontrolled flood waters heading for the sea, its mighty current uprooting trees and bouncing twenty-ton boulders along its rocky bed.

Freshets gutted minor canyons of brush and soil, so that temporarily the Legion of Vengeance was marooned in the security of Puma Canyon.

But when a blazing sun once more greeted the southland, heralding a mild California winter season, Señor Desperado saddled up Aguila and headed out of his bandit lair, bound for the Mission San Gabriel Archangel.

Curiosity burned within him, regarding the strange things which Señora Mateo had hinted about at his birthday fiesta—now fifteen days past.

On this, his earliest opportunity, Frederico was riding down to the ancient Mission to inquire into the secrets of his past, which were being held for him by Padre Ladistro.

Realizing that it would be suicidal to cross the open prairie of Rancho Mariposa on his way to the Mission, Frederico kept inside Arroyo Seco's yellow cliffs until he was well past Curd Rockler's ranch.

The sun was directly above the shading fig and lime trees which bordered El Camino Real, when Frederico drew rein alongside the mellow, buttressed walls of the old mission, and glanced up at the battery of corroded bronze bells hanging in the arched windows of the bell tower.

As he tied Aguila to a gnarled grapevine—famous throughout California for its treelike proportions, and said to be the largest grapevine in the entire world—Frederico saw the massive redwood doors of the Mission swing open on their bronze pivots, to reveal the stooped and bony figure of Father Ladistro, the Franciscan padre who had lived at the Mission over seventy-five years.

"Greetings, my son!" came the brisk salutation of the holy man, his voice holding none of the tremulous quality to be expected of a man nearing his century mark. "I have not had the pleasure of seeing you, Frederico mio, these many moons. Not since—"

Castalina smiled bitterly.

"—since happier days," he interrupted, as they passed into the cool, candle-lighted nave of the ancient building. "When I was the heir of Don José of the Rancho Mariposa, and not a hunted bandit and desperado."

Padre Ladistro's brittle lips bent in a benevolent smile.

"I do not see in you a *malo hombre*, but only a handsome caballero whom I have seen grow up from a *niño*," whispered the gentle priest. "You come, I know, to keep an appointment which Señora Rosita made for you, twenty years ago. Not so?"

Frederico nodded, and followed Padre Ladistro through soft-lighted aisles, through the ten-foot thickness

of a rock-and-adobe wall, into a sacristy with vaulted walls of white-washed plaster. Candles guttered in wall-niche sconces.

"I have prayed that life would be spared me until you came to seek the document your departed madre once left in my keeping," whispered the aged priest. "With mine own hands did I seal up your madre's parcel, in this very wall."

Taking a blunt-edged ax from a nearby cabinet, the priest hacked into the brittle plaster of the sacristy wall, to reveal a hollow space where a single adobe brick had been pried from its socket in bygone years then shelled over with a veneer of mud.

Out of the cavity thus exposed for the first time in a generation, Padre Ladistro withdrew a flat, oblong case made of hammered Spanish silver, now dusty and tarnished with the years.

Frederico's heart slammed his ribs as he broke the wax seals which bore the imprinted insignia of the proud Castalina family. Opening the lid of the silver box, he drew forth a number of folded parchments, which cradled in his grasp.

The topmost parchment was covered with Señora Rosita's script, its flourishing curliques difficult to read, its text couched in the florid, old-style Castillian.

"I will read it for you, my son," volunteered Padre Ladistro, noting the hidalgo's embarrassment. "I know its contents by heart, for I helped your madre compose it.

"Briefly, Frederico, the secret which she wanted me to reveal to you is this: You are not Californian, nor Mexicano. You have no Spanish blood in your veins. You are—"

In the ghostly candlelight, Frederico Pasqual Castalina felt his veins turn to ice.

"Not a Spaniard?" he interrupted. "I do not understand, good father—"

Padre Ladistro consulted the crinkly parchment to freshen his memory, then glanced up with a strange smile playing on his thin, kindly lips.

"You will understand many strange things in a moment or so, *hijo*," the priest said cryptically. "*You are an Americano*, Frederico!"

"An—American?"

"*Si*. Your father and mother were traveling across Arizona by covered wagon in 1835. You were attacked by Apaches. Only you and an infant brother one year your junior were left alive out of that raid. The good Don José and Señora Rosita adopted you into the Castalina family, after I brought you to California, as a babe. Your brother was adopted by an American army officer in Monterey."

Señor Desperado groped mentally against the confusion that whirled and tumbled inside his skull.

"But I—am a gringo? It is impossible—"

The venerable padre tapped the parchment with a bony finger.

"Be not ashamed of your American parentage, my son! The gringo, as you call him, is hewing a mighty nation out of the Western wilderness—a nation that will some day sweep from ocean to ocean, to be respected by all the peoples of the earth. Yours is a proud heritage—one with a future vastly more bright than that of Spain, whose heyday has passed forever, I fear."

Frederico pressed palms to throbbing temples. Then he looked up. "You say I have a brother—perhaps still alive?" he asked.

The kindly old padre nodded.

"Alive, yes! Your real name was Frederick, of which Frederico is the

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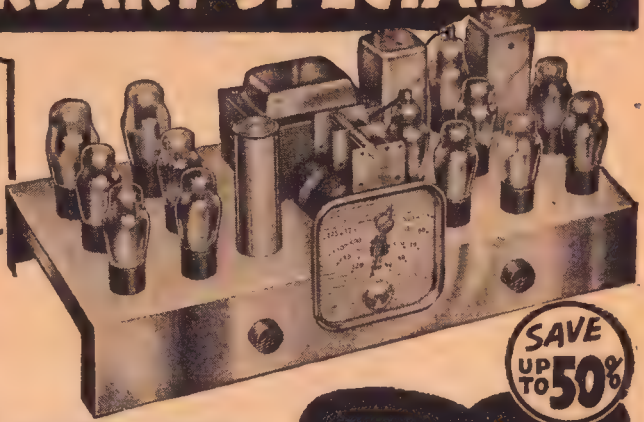

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Spanish. Your last name was a noble one in American annals—the name of Harrington."

Harrington? The name reverberated against Señor Desperado's eardrums, as he repeated it huskily to himself for the first time—"Frederick Harrington."

Then, in an icy shock of wonder, the hidalgo gasped out: "Harrington? And you say—I have a brother living, of about my own age—who was adopted by a military officer?"

Padre Ladistro, fortified with a knowledge which he had kept locked in his breast for many years, smiled as he whispered:

"Your brother's name is Jack Harrington. At the present moment he has a commission in the California Rangers, over in the city of Angeles. A man who, I hear, saved your life last summer!"

Señor Desperado stood like a man stunned. At last he had the answer to that strange, impelling attraction which existed between him and Jack Harrington of the Rangers.

Señor Desperado and Corporal Harrington were blood brothers, separated since infancy by a strange destiny!

"I . . . I feel overcome, padre," whispered the hidalgo at last. "To learn, after a lifetime of pride in my Spanish ancestry, that I am a gringo. But it fills me with happiness to know that I can claim Jack Harrington as my own blood. I—"

He stared down at the other papers which his mother's astounding silver box had revealed.

"These other papers—what are they, good padre?" he asked.

The aged Ladistro shook his head to this question.

"I know not. Señora Rosita brought them to the mission the day she and I composed this other letter for you to read after you had attained your majority, Frederico. Let us look at them, and see."

Hands shaking as if from the ague, Señor Desperado lifted the topmost parchment.

It was a *diseño*, or survey map, filled with familiar landmarks—the Arroyo Seco, the Sierra Madre range, the Rio San Miguel—a chart labeled in bold flowing script: "El Rancho Mariposa."

"Santa Sabana!" breathed Frederico, turning to seize the padre's elbow with viselike pressure. "Do you realize the significance of what we look upon, father? These are the missing documents which my padre, Don José, thought were lost—the deed to his hacienda! With these Don José could have prevented the *maltido* Curd Rockler from stealing his home and lands. It was here that my madre hid the papers for safe-keeping so long ago, and forgot or neglected to inform my padre of their hiding place."

A footstep sounded on the adobe threshold of the door entering the nave. Padre Ladistro and Señor Desperado turned, expecting to see a friar or an Indian neophyte with a faggot broom.

Instead, they saw the leering, hate-twisted features of Curd Rockler, the candle beams glinting off the muzzle of the cocked six-gun he held leveled at Frederico's heart!

"Riding past on the El Camino Real with my men just now, I recognized Señor Desperado's horse!" snarled the gringo killer, his voice thick with hate. "It seems I arrive in time to see you locate the missing title to the Rancho Mariposa, eh?"

The deed to the Rancho Mariposa in his hand, his troubles over, Frederico suddenly faces murder at the hands of the outlaw, Rockler. If Rockler squeezes that trigger— Read what happens in next week's Wild West Weekly.

The Wranglers Corner

The Range Boss will be glad to consider contributions from beginners and amateur writers and artists.

The contributions will be judged on their merits as amateur contributions. The work of professionals is not desired.

Manuscripts should preferably be typed, on one side of the paper only, and double-spaced. However, full consideration will be given to manuscripts neatly hand-written in ink.

The author's name and address and age should appear on the first page.

Stories should not exceed five hundred words, and verses should not exceed twenty lines. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

Drawings should be in India ink on plain white paper. No pencil or crayon drawings can be used. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

All published material will be paid for at good space rates.

Manuscripts that are not used cannot be returned, but an effort will be made to return drawings, provided it is especially requested, and a stamped, addressed envelope is inclosed for that purpose.

Address all contributions to the WRANGLERS CORNER, c/o Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

THE first batch of letters we've received since we changed a few things in the Corner—well, they're plumb favorable. Most of 'em agree that when we're doing something that's helping new writers, it's only fair that we go the whole distance, not stopping at just buying their work. And nothing is more helpful than honest, straight-from-the-shoulder criticism.

That's just what we're doing our best to pass on to you amateurs. You realize, of course, that we can't take each of your stories or poems or sketches and send it back with a criticism; that's a job for a school or private teacher in writing or drawing, and the woods are full of both. Where we aim to help is to take the stories and sketches we judge the best you send in, and tell you why we like 'em and why we don't like some things in 'em. That, you see, gives you models to go by—if you study them. Try it next time when you write or draw.

We won't criticize the poems; they speak for themselves.

Maybe you won't side us on our

criticisms. That's all right; we expect that. Write in and tell us where we disagree. If your criticism ropes us and hogties us, we'll put it in the Corner. How's that?

And don't forget to write out and send in those true Western experiences of yours that we told you about last week. We'll pay for 'em, just as we pay for all the accepted work of the amateurs. If you've been scared to try writing fiction, here's your chance. Don't try passing off fiction as fact, though, unless you're a plumb gifted liar.

Here are this week's lucky stories. Don't be discouraged if yours isn't here. Try again.

TRAIL'S END FOR A GUNNY

By W. R. Wenrich

Ephrata, Pennsylvania

Shorty Hibbs drove into Bull Butte, tied his bronc to the hitch rack and waddled his bowed legs into the Ace-High Casino, casually looking over the crowd for Buck Drayton.

Buck had warned him that if he ever set foot in Bull Butte again, he would never get his six-gun from its leather, and Shorty promised not to take it from the leather to drill such an ornery coyote.

Sheriff MacKenzie, sitting placidly in the corner, keeping his weathered eyes open for any sign of trouble, spotted Shorty milling through the crowd. Quietly he walked over and led him out the side door.

"Hunting someone, Shorty?" he asked, releasing his hold, "or you hunting trouble?"

"Just looking around, sheriff," drawled Shorty, looking up at the burly officer of the law. "Thought mebbe I might see some of those howling coyotes that scare people."

"That's what I thought," chuckled the sheriff. "Well, I'm putting you where you'll cool till daylight, and then you're riding westward and staying out of town. Savvy?"

He led the protesting Shorty to the calaboose, locked him up for safekeeping and put his horse in a stable for the night.

In the morning he released Shorty, warning him: "Leave town pronto, you runt. You can't match bullet smoke with that gun-slinging Buck Drayton. What are you trying to do, commit suicide?"

"Listen, sheriff," pleaded Shorty, "you know he rustled our yearlings—"

"You can't prove it," the sheriff argued, "or, by thunder, I'd have had him in the pen long ago."

"I know I can't prove that, sheriff," Shorty said sullenly, "but I can prove that he can't keep me out of this town."

The sheriff took Shorty across the street and made him mount his bronc. "Now ride for home and not for boothill," he counseled.

Shorty wondered why there were so many men loitering along the street so early in the morning, until he saw Buck Drayton loom up in front of him.

"So you came back, you yellow crybaby?" Drayton challenged. "Well, I told you you'd never draw, and I meant it."

The sheriff came running up panting: "No shooting here, Drayton. You can't shoot a man when he don't draw."

"I'll give him a chance," Drayton drawled. "Let him get down offn that cayuse and face me."

"You got your chance," Shorty said, dismounting and sending his bronc to the side. "You're at the end of the trail, you thieving galoot!"

Calmly he walked down the center of the street amid an undertone of buzzing voices and wondering eyes. Stepping off fifty paces he turned and faced Drayton.

"You can start your smoke any time now, you howling coyote," he shouted, walking slowly toward him.

Drayton hunched his shoulders and leaned forward slowly measuring his steps with his eyes fixed on Shorty and a sneer of defiance on his face. He had his arm hooked at an angle ready to snatch his gun the moment he thought Shorty had batted an eyelash, but all he did was walk steadily toward him with his hands hanging loosely at his sides.

Drayton yelled: "Get ready for boothill, greenhorn. Slap leather!" and yanked his gun clear with lightning speed, raised it and was bringing it down in a circle.

Shorty coolly laid his hand on the butt of his gun and waited until Drayton's gun was almost level, and then tilting his gun without pulling it from the leather, he snapped the hammer.

The loud roar of the .45s rent the still morning. Red flame flashed and a puff of white smoke left Shorty's gun.

Drayton's face showed surprise—and then agony as he clutched at his stomach, buckled at the knees and plunged forward on his face down the trail to boothill.

When we learned that Señor Wenrich is a disabled war veteran, we hoped his story'd be good. You see, we're patriotic, and we like to make every day in the year Poppy Day as far as we can do it. Those disabled war veterans of ours are forgotten too easily. We hope you folks remember what they did for us.

But when we got into the story, we found that we didn't have to give Señor Wenrich a break because he's a war vet. We were swept along in the conflict between Shorty and Buck right from the start. The Big Boss always told us to look for stories with "arresting openings." That's just what this one has.

Then the plot deepens, and suspense starts. This keeps up. It rises to a good climax, and Shorty springs a surprise by shooting through his holster. The ending is quick, not dragged-out after the story has been told.

Like most of the amateurs' stories, the characters in this one are little more than names. We suggest that you study the way authors describe their characters and give them a few distinctive traits. This can't be done to full advantage in stories of this length, but flashes of characterization can be worked in, and, if properly handled, these are most effective.

Vays con Dios, amigo!

LAW COMES TO SANDY RIDGE

By Sam M. George—Age 23

Westfield, North Carolina

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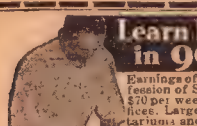

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of a slim little Texan who bore the handle of Pot-shot Hendrix.

When Pot-shot rode into Sandy Ridge, he had no intention of staying more than a few minutes. But circumstances altered his plans.

He was quelling a gnawing thirst at the Red Heart Saloon when the swinging doors were pushed open and three heavily bearded hombres entered.

"This is a stick-up!" a harsh voice announced. "All o' yuh line up by th' bar!"

Pot-shot saw the bandits reflected in the bar mirror. Slowly, he turned and faced the robbers. The patrons were moving toward the bar, their hands held high.

"Stay where yuh are, ever'body!" Pot-shot yelled. "Seems to me," he addressed the bandits, "it's agin' the law to rob a hombre of his belongin's."

"Haw-haw-haw!" roared the big fellow. The others guffawed and nudged each other.

"Law?" the leader barked. "Thar ain't no law in this country, stranger. And thar never will be. Bull Lawson's th' only law 'round hyar. Now git yore paws in th' air 'fore I send a chunk o' lead into yore ornery carcass!"

The little Texan slowly started his hands upward. On level with his shoulders, however, they paused momentarily. Then, before anyone knew what was happening, Pot-shot's hands were sweeping downward and coming up with movements too fast for the human eye to follow.

And all of the thunder in the heavens seemed to converge in that room and explode in one great *boom!*

The big fellow called Bull coughed, shook his head, and pitched, face downward, on the floor. His henchman on his right, turned suddenly pale, his face drawn in an expression of pain, and stretched his length beside that of his boss. The third outlaw managed to fire one shot before the Texan's bullet sent him crashing backward. The missile was futile, however, as far as Pot-shot was concerned—for he had dropped flat on his stomach when he had started shooting.

The crowd stood aghast, bewildered. They had never witnessed anything like this before. Such speed and marksmanship surpassed even such men as Hickok and Earp.

The little Texan came to his feet as a large, jovial man elbowed his way through the crowd and approached him with a flabby hand extended.

"Stranger," he said, "this town needs a man like you. I'm Jason Thore, president

of the Citizens' Committee, and we would all be mighty proud if you would wear this badge."

He held out a silver badge on which was engraved the word "Sheriff."

The little Texan grinned boyishly and took the badge.

"I always did have a hankerin' to be a lawman," he said.

In Pot-shot, this story has a hero with a flash of color. His size and the way he does things make him more than a mere name, though the author could have built up his character much more. The writing is very good, especially the scene in which Pot-shot shoots his enemy. This is highly dramatic writing, and the kind that every writer should study and strive for in his own work.

The plot, of course, is the very ancient one of the runt cleaning up the bad town, then getting the sheriff's job. But it isn't the plot, but the way it's written that puts a story on the pay list.

And that's what put this one there. Señor George made a workmanlike job of it. He ought to study, read plenty of fiction, and keep writing.

SAND DEATH

By Harry Kiel—Age 19

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Wind swept swiftly across the desert. It played untiringly with the faces of the three men buried almost completely there in the sand. The trio, sunk up to the shoulders, did not feel the sting of the sand. They could not feel. They were dead!

Smoky—coming from Dawson, and heading for nowhere in particular, spied these corpses on the sea of sand. He dismounted to investigate.

A whistle came to his lips. "Whew!" he said. "Buried alive! The poor devils must have suffered!" He high-tailed it back to Dawson and spread the news. The sheriff and the coroner went after the dead men.

That evening the town held a meeting.

"This is Pancho's dirty work," said the sheriff. "He left his trade-mark." The sheriff held up two black snakes tied in a knot. "The blood-thirsty greaser's human sport must be stopped!" yelled the sheriff. "Pancho must be brought in, dead or alive."

A country-wide search was started. The results seemed slow in coming. Pancho had vanished. For a month not a trace of him could be found. Then the sheriff's posse brought in Banker John Potts and his accountant, Bill Newhall. Their faces wore the ghastly look of death. They were victims of Pancho's humor. Their death had been the sand death.

The people were in a rage. They cursed the menacing Mexican and swore vengeance aloud. The womenfolk were fearful. Nobody was safe unless Pancho was captured.

Two days after the finding of the banker, the posse, which had ridden almost all that time, pushed into town. A huge Mexican, guarded by Smoky and the sheriff, rode with them. His well-known sneer was gone. His beady eyes shifted constantly, looking for means of escape.

The streets were jammed with people. Everyone with murder in his heart. They surged forward and tore the devil from his horse. They dragged him out to the desert, while he begged for mercy. His pleas brought much pleasure to those angry people.

They buried him up to the shoulders in an ant hill, and covered him with honey and molasses. His agonized screams were heard back in town. The ants were eating him to pieces. The women shuddered and hid their faces in their aprons. Out on the desert two black snakes writhed on the ant hill. The sand began to whirl and whirl, and the desert became an inferno.

In plot and characterization, this story leaves much to be desired. The author hasn't developed his material to its full possibilities. It is really a series of incidents, with situations that are good, but lack drama. Then, you ask, what put it across?

We'll tell you, and this goes for everyone who sends in stories. It's because the author writes easily and shows promise of doing much better work. Judged along with other stories, it rated high in our estima-

tion. You know we don't expect too much from you amateurs. Some stories are so good they're plumb above amateur class, but they all can't be that good. It's the promising stories from young writers that we like to read with hope of being helpful and we're happy to find that this is one of them.

Next time, Harry, take situations like these and put real people into them. Make us see them and sense the drama in their conflict. Stories like these don't always require complicated plots. People who are more than mere names often make their own plots when placed in dramatic situations because they are convincing.

Read a lot and keep writing. Do that, and you'll stand a good chance of getting there.

DEAD MAN'S JUSTICE

By W. C. Runton—Age 19

Little Rock, Arkansas

Little Bart Stevens came out of the sheriff's office and strode grimly across the dusty street toward the Double Eagle Saloon. Bart's father was dead—shot in cold blood—and the sheriff had refused to arrest the man who did it.

"It's this way, fella," the clean-cut young lawman had told Bart. "I know Red Lathrop is crooked. An' I believe he shot yore dad, like you say he did. But we can't prove it. It's just yore word against his."

Bart guessed bitterly that Lathrop controlled the law. Maybe so, but there was one law he couldn't control: Colt law. He shifted his dead father's guns on his hips and stepped through the batwing saloon doors.

Straight up to Red Lathrop, drinking at the bar with his cronies, Bart walked. His legs felt weak, and when he spoke his voice sounded shrill and funny, but he didn't care. "Lathrop!" he called.

The big redhead turned, and Bart landed

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a fist flush on his chin, then jumped back out of reach. The man's head bobbed back. He took a step forward, his face purple with rage.

"Why, yuh little brat!" he roared. "I'll—" He stopped, fists clenching and unclenching. "If you wasn't a bald-faced kid, I'd mash yore head in!"

"Don't let that stop you," Bart yelled. "I sling a man's guns. Draw!" And his own hands streaked to holsters.

Bart was thankful then for all the days he had spent practicing a quick draw with his dad's guns, which he had sneaked out behind the house. Still, Lathrop shot first. Bart felt the bullet fan his face. Then he squeezed the trigger, kept squeezing it. The shots echoed like thunder.

Then, suddenly, everything was quiet. Bart discovered he hadn't been touched. Lathrop lay dead, and Bart noticed frantically that his henchmen were closing in on him, muttering angrily. Then:

"Hold it, gents!" a cool voice rang out. "I'm backin' the kid's play."

Bart flung around and saw the young sheriff grinning over two blue gun barrels. He had followed little Bart.

"Lathrop asked for it," he was saying. "He was going to kill the youngster, so I bought chips in the game. If you want the kid, you'll have to take me, too. An' now, if they ain't any objections, me and the button will be leavin'."

Little Bart had found a friend.

We'd like to criticize this story, but durned if we can see much to criticize. It's short and to the point. There are flashes of character that the author blends in skillfully as the story moves along. In telling it, the author has condensed it and kept it down to the shortest kind of short short story.

And so, now for the poems:

BOOM TOWN

By Theodore Zeckser—Age 18

Gillett, Wisconsin

Nugget-hungry gold town,
Feeling riding high,
Steel-eyed lawmen
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WESTWARD BOUND

By Bill Allen—Age 13

Hollywood, California

My mom and dad, just dream and plan
'Bout what I'll be when I'm a man.
A writer, mom wants me to be,
Pop says that I should go to sea.

And while they fret, and fuss and stew,
I'm makin' plans 'bout what I'll do.
A friendly bronc that I can ride,
A prairie reachin' far and wide.

Mountains rearin' here and there,
Deserts shinin' hot and bare.
'Tis there I know that I will find
The kind of life that they won't mind.

There'll be no cops upon my beat.
There'll be no need to guard my street.
It will be big, and clean, and wide—
A highway where real men shall ride.

And there you have it, amigos—your Wranglers Corner. It's yours to make what you want it to be, but we aren't mind readers. Write and tell us what you like and what you don't like. When anything belongs to you, you ought to have something to say about it.

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TF BARO

Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HI, folks! Glad to be with yuh ag'in. Come in an' set down an' make yoreselves to home. All comers, all ages, is welcome to the ol' Corral!

The first number I've found fer yuh today is one thet I enjoy givin' yuh because it sorta fulfills a duty I always feel toward the ol'-timers o' the West. As I reckon I've often said before—but won't ever git tired o' repeatin'—the men who first tilled the land in our broad plains, an' felled the trees to make roads, an' pushed thar way across from sea to sea, had *guts* to do what they did.

An' besides guts they had a sense o' personal responsibility, which is a mighty important thing fer us all to try to have in these days o' temptation. Fer it is awfully easy, folks, awfully easy fer us to lay down an' let the other feller run the country, instead o' realizin' thet the only way to keep what the ol' fellers won in the way o' freedom an' democracy is by doin' *our* share to see thet nothin' destroys either.

After which bit o' soap-boxin' I'll give yuh:

ODE TO THE OLD-TIMERS*

By Wallace D. Coburn

Slowly, yet steadily, one by one,
The old-timers go to their last long sleep,
And in each Montana has lost a son
Whose precious soul she fain would keep.
But they all pass over the Great Divide,
To seek new fields on the other side.

* Taken by kind permission of the author from his collection of cowboy songs entitled "Rhymes from a Roundup Camp," published by G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York.

But few remain of those heroes bold,
Who came "out West" in the early days,
And opened the mines of yellow gold
Where the elk and buffalo used to graze.
Ah! Few of that gallant crew remain
Who years ago came across the plain.

How many people in this State
Think of the hardships these men endured,
How many really appreciate
The wealth that they for our State secured?
Alas! There are few of those aged hearts
We may yet make glad ere the soul departs.

Hyar's a poem yuh'll enjoy. It gives yuh an idee of how cowboys think o' city folks fer a change. After all, yuh have to remember that cowboys ain't so dumb. They got idees about city folks—an' they ain't so far wrong sometimes, at thet. See what yuh think about this one that James Barton Adams dug up fer yuh:

A COWBOY'S THOUGHTS

By James Barton Adams

They haven't got much use fer us, them high-toned city fellers,
Togged out in hifalutin clothes almighty slick an' fine,
With bokays in their buttonholes an' blossoms on their smellers
That shows familiarity with somethin' wuss than wine.
They seem to think the riders from the ranges an' the ranches
Are sort o' cactus weeds among the flowers o' the land—
Jest harum-scarum renegades, an' wilder than Comanches,
An' in a gun perceedin' allus keen to play a hand.

Aristocrats is good enough, I reckon, in their place,
Referrin' to the wimmen jest the same as to the men.
The feminines, I will admit, are purty in their places,
But haven't no mo' muscle than a dominecker hen.
Give me the little rancher gals, with faces like the roses,
An' figgers that the Venus'd be mighty proud to own,
Built solider than three-year-olds from hoofs cl'ar up to noses,
With Indy-rubber sinews, an' a spring in every bone.

I never yet could see the fun in fashionable dancin',
Whar men an' wimmen slide about on unambitious legs,
Jest go a-potterin' around an' never do no prancin',
As if they was afeared the floor was made of brittle eggs.
I like the Western style whar thar ain't never any shirkin',
My pard, a snappy-muscled gal as sensible as sweet,
When to the fiddlin' we git our every j'int to workin',
An' spank the dust out o' the floor with never-tirin' feet.

Fur me, refined society hain't got the least attraction.
The pinch of a claw-hammer coat'd keep me in a fret,
An' I could never glide around with fashionable action;
Too easygoin' in its style to even raise a sweat.
Give me the jolly country dance, whar fun is jest a-poppin',
Whar boys an' gals is full o' snap, an' makin' pleasure climb,
An' keep it up the hull night long without a thought o' stoppin'
Until we hear the ringin' o' the bells at breakfast time.

Thar ain't no jealousy in me about the city dandy.
I wasn't built to ornament no suit o' tailor clothes
An' feed the upper-story gals on taffy talk an' candy,
An' bow an' smile an' smirk an' grin, an' all sich things as those.
Give me the free an' easy life among the herds o' cattle
Aboard a lively bronco thet is techy to the quirt,
An' I've a sort of idee at the closin' of life's battle
I'll stand as squar' a show as if I wore a varnished shirt.

An' I reckon he's right at thet, eh, folks?

Waal, let's have the song:

WHEN BILLY THE KID RIDES AGAIN*

By S. Omar Barker

High are the mountains and low is the plain,
Where Billy the Kid comes a-ridin' again.
Old Juánico sees him—black on the moon,
And two haggard horsemen come following soon.

Now topping the rimrock, now hid in a vale,
Four ghostly white riders press close on his trail.

No thudding of hoofbeats, no sound anywhere,
But nine silent dead men are racing the air.

Beyond the old courthouse and following fast,
The tenth pale pursuer springs out of the past.

Old Juánico sees them—no other eye can,
The galloping Kid and his strange caravan.

Fort Sumner to White Oaks, Tularosa to Bent—
Gaunt horsemen await him at each settlement.

For blood's in the moonmist, as two dozen dead
Swoop down the dim trails where their killer has fled.
Gray in the mountains and white on the plain,
At moon-haunted midnight they're riding again.

Time shadows the silence in old Lincoln town—
Look! Billy the Kid comes a-galloping down!

The West is full of such ghostly caravans—even if all of us can't see 'em!

Here's a fine poem from the pen of Curley W. Fletcher. See how you like it.

THE VOICES OF DIM TRAILS

The voices of dim trails, we've ridden,
Are somber, and silent, it seems,
Old lures they once held remain hidden;
Enwrapped in illusions and dreams.

* Taken by kind permission of the author from his collection of songs entitled "Buckaroo Ballads."

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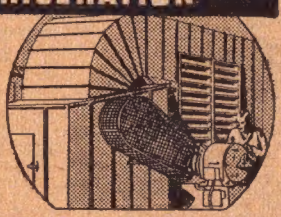

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I cherish those hours we've squandered,
On trails that were dark and untamed;
I think of the wild ways we wandered,
And cry like a child—unashamed.

I try to forswear this great yearning;
I would that my heart would forget,
Like ashes with embers still burning,
I am deep in despond and regret.

For I dream of you and you only,
And dreams are so empty and bare;
The nights are so long, and so lonely,
And the days are so filled with care.

Oftentimes I ride through the meadow,
Where the creek swings into the swale,
And picture you there, in the shadows,
Still waiting beside the dim trail.

A pinenut bird screams in the piñons,
A swift hawk swoops out of the blue;
A mourning dove croons in the canyons,
And I dream of dim trails—and you.

In your bright eyes dark shadows are playing,
Your cheeks are like roses in spring,
Like willows, your shoulders are swaying,
With the grace of a bird on the wing.

I can hear your spur's silvery jingle,
Your horse softly champing his bit,
And whispers of pine trees that mingle
With the song of the saddle you sit.

A weary wolf barks harsh intrusion,
And wakens me with his weird wails,
To find you are but an illusion;
An echo from yesterday's trails.

I guess all of us have pleasant memories of trails that we've wandered in our time, and of friends who have traveled those trails with us. That's why a song like this one strikes home. Mr. Fletcher has written a lot of other good Western poems, and we're proud to have him with us once again in the old Corral this week.

Don't forget, folks, that we're always on the lookout for contributions. And here's hoping that we'll see you all again soon. So long, and good luck, and we'll be waitin' to hear from you.

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